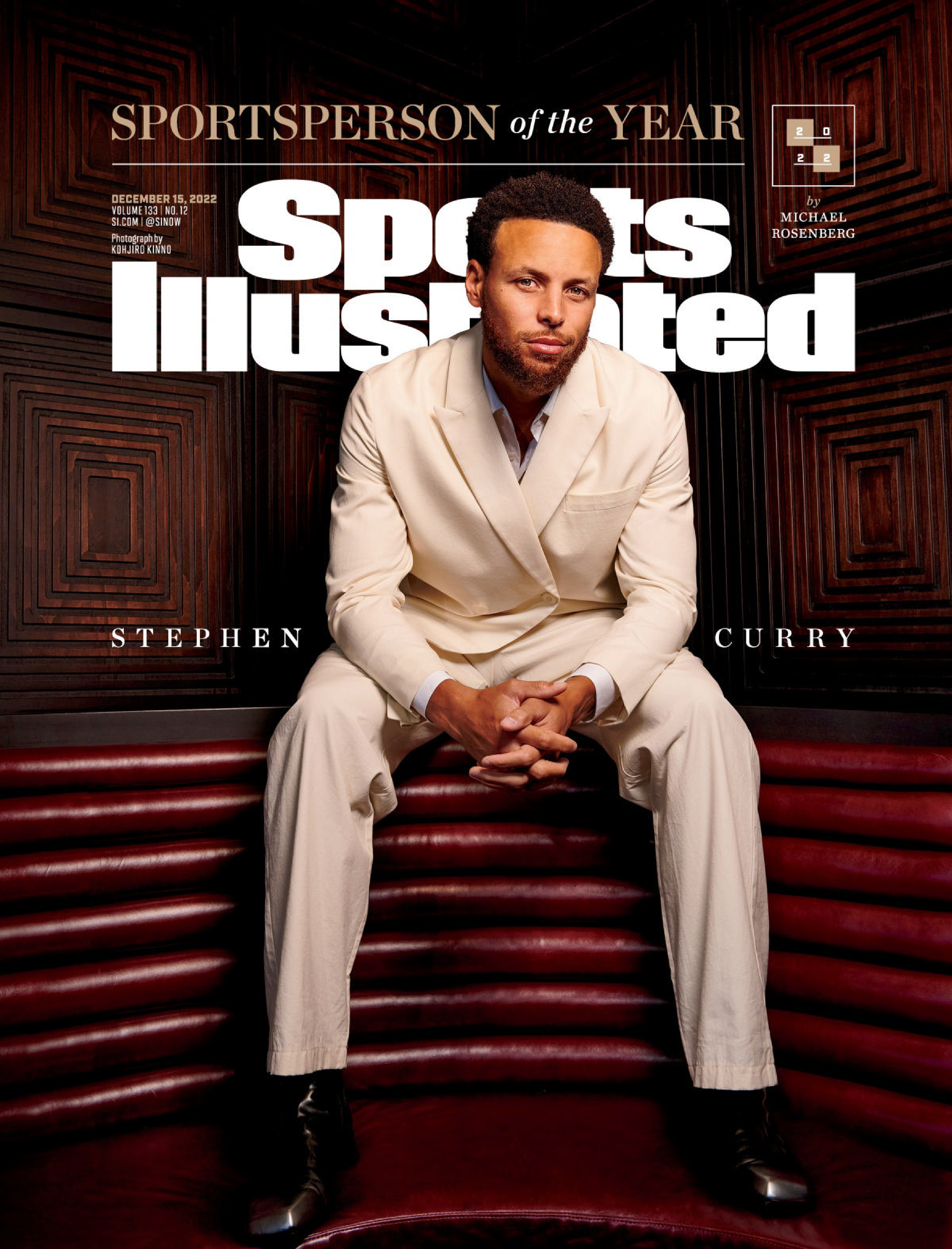

SPORTSPERSON *of the* YEAR

2022

DECEMBER 15, 2022
VOLUME 133 | NO. 12
SI.COM | @SINOW

Photograph by
KOHJIRO KINNO

Sports Illustrated

by
MICHAEL
ROSENBERG

STEPHEN CURRY

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CONGRATS TO STEPHEN CURRY ON BEING NAMED SPORTS ILLUSTRATED SPORTSPERSON OF THE YEAR

We’re proud to support you
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RUNNING THE GOOD LIFE
Motherhood motivated sprinter Allyson Felix, our 2022 Muhammad Ali Legacy Award winner, to use her voice and her company to fight for the rights of women athletes.

LINEUP

DECEMBER 15, 2022 | VOLUME 133 | NO. 12

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KOHJIRO KINNO; HAIR BY ALEXANDER ARMAND; MAKEUP BY AUTUMN MOULTRIE AT THE WALL GROUP; STYLING BY APRIL JACKSON; ON THE COVER: STYLING BY JASON BOLDEN; GROOMING BY YUSEF

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LINEUP

BACK ON TOP
After two trying seasons, Curry led the new-look Warriors back to the Finals, where a fourth title—and a new piece of hardware—awaited.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

SPORTSPERSON *of the* YEAR | FEATURES

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The 2022 Sportsperson of the Year lifted his teammates, and countless others, with his charitable works

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After being bullied, the SportsKid of the Year leaned into his autism to become a golfer and an entrepreneur

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The track and field legend—and advocate for athletes and mothers—is the winner of the Muhammad Ali Legacy Award

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GOATS FAREWELL

The sports world said baa-bye to a veritable herd of great ones, including a slugger, a partying tight end and two tennis greats

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THE HILINSKIS

In spreading the story of their son's death, two parents hope to take on a mental health crisis and shape the future of college sports. But their work comes at a steep cost

BY GREG BISHOP

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EDITORS' LETTER

CLUES TO FOLLOW

BY THE EDITORS OF SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

SWEET SHOTS
SI photographed Curry (top) in San Francisco in October and Felix a month later in Los Angeles.

ALAN SPRINGER (2)

THE EASY narrative about Stephen Curry's career is that no one saw this coming. It's true; the Warriors star wasn't exactly the Chosen One coming out of high school. He didn't even get a scholarship offer from Virginia Tech, his dream school and his father's alma mater. His physical skill set, all 6' 2" of it, didn't immediately scream NBA legend when he entered the league in 2009. And besides, Curry has enjoyed the kind of rarefied success—four championship rings, two regular-season MVP awards and, this year, an NBA Finals MVP—that nobody ever sees coming. That would be a lot to expect.

On the other hand: In retrospect the qualities that have helped make Curry the player and the person he is—and our choice as the 2022 Sportsperson of the Year—have been there all along. His first substantial mention in this magazine came in our March 31, 2008, issue, after the sophomore led Davidson to the Sweet 16 by scoring a combined 70 points in NCAA tournament upsets over Gonzaga and Georgetown. The talk that week around the Davidson program was of how humble its nascent superstar was. The anecdote cited in that story to illustrate the point: Earlier in the year Curry had found another student's wallet, containing $160, and sought him out to return it.

A small thing, to be sure. But 14 years later, echoes of that gesture—its honesty, its decency, its humanity—are everywhere in Michael Rosenberg's profile of Curry *(page 32)*. This is the 69th time SPORTS ILLUSTRATED has chosen a Sportsperson of the Year. (Curry, who shared the award with the 2017–18 Warriors, joins Tiger Woods, LeBron James and Tom Brady as the only multitime SOTYs.) Each of those honorees took their own path to the moment, but for the best of them it was a culmination of a lifetime of small choices as well as a year of grand achievements. You may not know exactly how it will unfold, but if you're paying attention greatness often foreshadows itself.

We'll honor Curry with a gala event in San Francisco on Dec. 8, when we'll also celebrate Allyson Felix, our Muhammad Ali Legacy Award winner *(page 48)*, and Carter Bonas, a young golfer who is the SI KIDS SportsKid of the Year *(page 46)*. We can sort of say we saw Felix's future as the most-decorated U.S. Olympic track athlete; check out the photo of her as a 15-year-old entry in Faces in the Crowd *(page 53)*. But her work as an activist and entrepreneur on behalf of working mothers has made a much more meaningful impact. Carter is just 11 years old, but he's already on his own path of activism and entrepreneurship. He's an inspiration to everyone—especially those who, like him, live with autism. As with Curry and Felix, we see greatness in him now—and much more to come. □

LEADING OFF

HAIL TO THE

THE YEAR BEGAN WITH GEORGIA SLAYING ITS (CRIMSON) DRAGON AND SAW THE WARRIORS REMIND EVERYONE WHY THEY'RE STILL GOLDEN. COME AUTUMN, THE ASTROS SHOWED WHY THEY'RE AS INEVITABLE AS THE SEASONS. THE CHAMPIONS OF 2022 WOWED AND THRILLED—AND LOOKED GOOD DOING IT

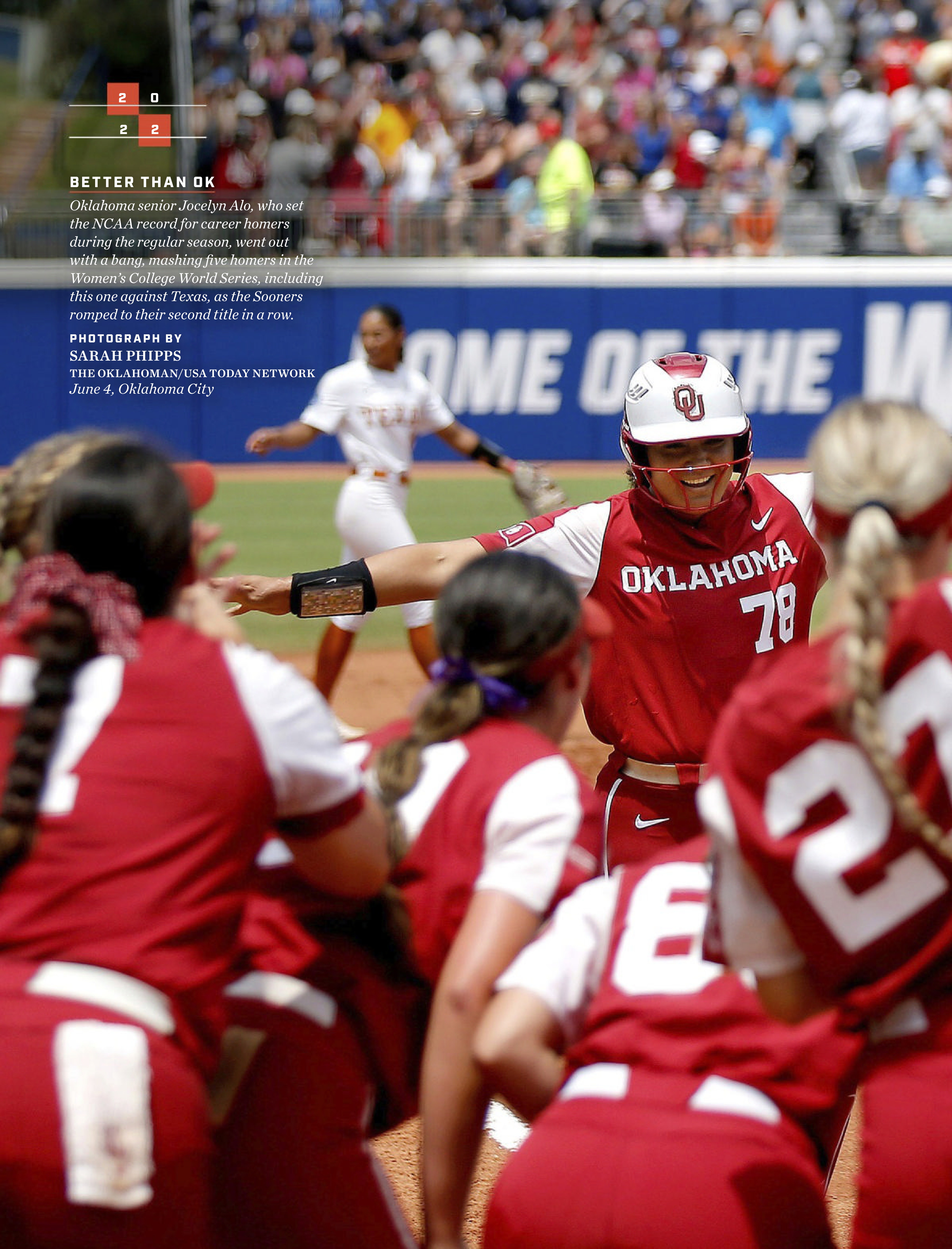
CHAMPS 2022

DAWGS’ DAY

George Pickens’s first-quarter diving catch set the tone for Georgia’s 33–18 win over Alabama in the CFP championship game, which gave the school its first national title in 41 years.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DAVID E. KLUTHO
January 10, Indianapolis

FOR MORE, FOLLOW
@SIFULLFRAME



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BETTER THAN OK

Oklahoma senior Jocelyn Alo, who set the NCAA record for career homers during the regular season, went out with a bang, mashing five homers in the Women's College World Series, including this one against Texas, as the Sooners romped to their second title in a row.

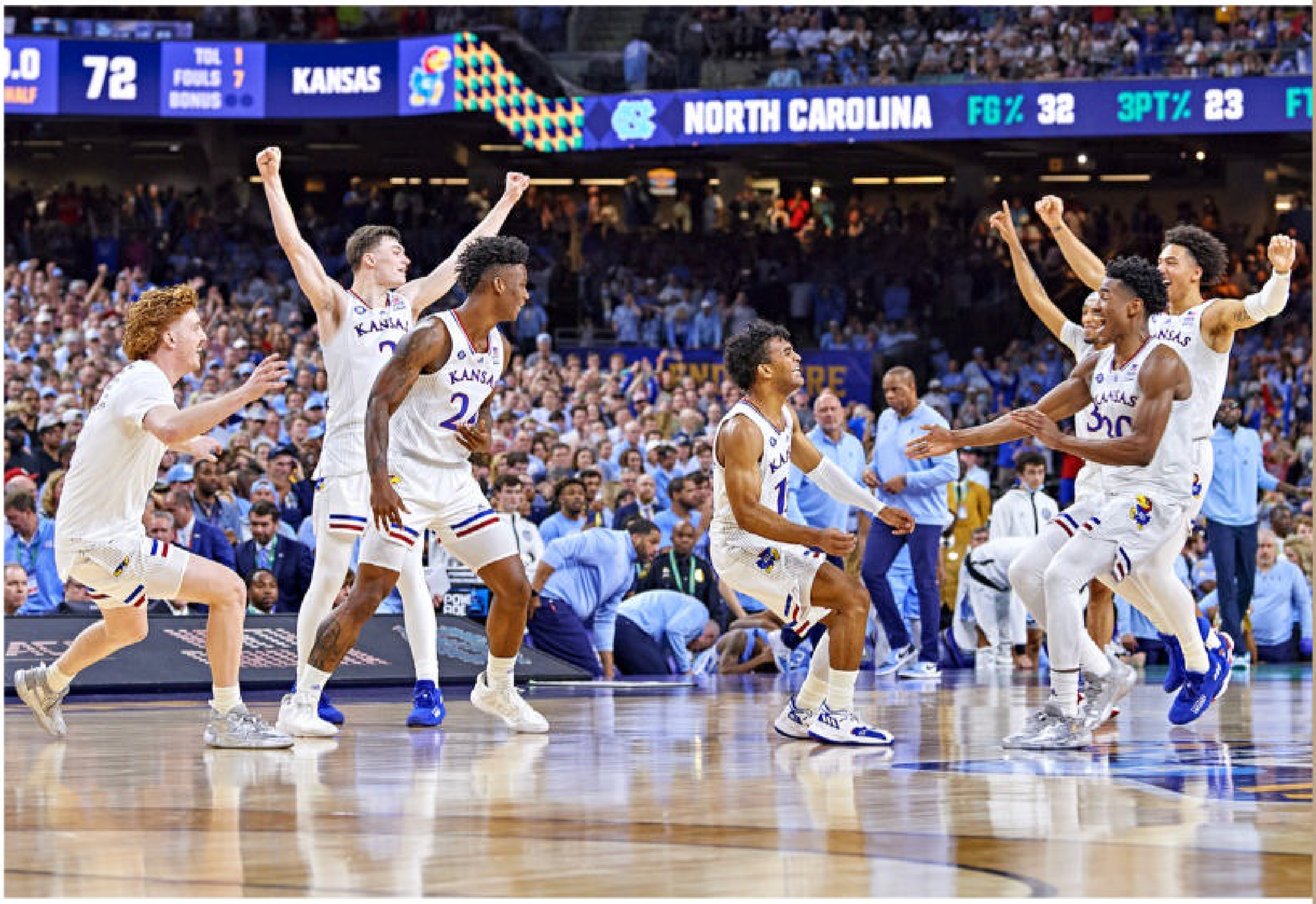
PHOTOGRAPH BY
SARAH PHIPPS
THE OKLAHOMAN/USA TODAY NETWORK
June 4, Oklahoma City

WOMEN'S COLL

KU'S KO

Kansas overcame a 15-point halftime deficit to beat UNC for the national title.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
GREG NELSON *April 4, New Orleans*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KANSAS
NORTH CAROLINA
FG% 32
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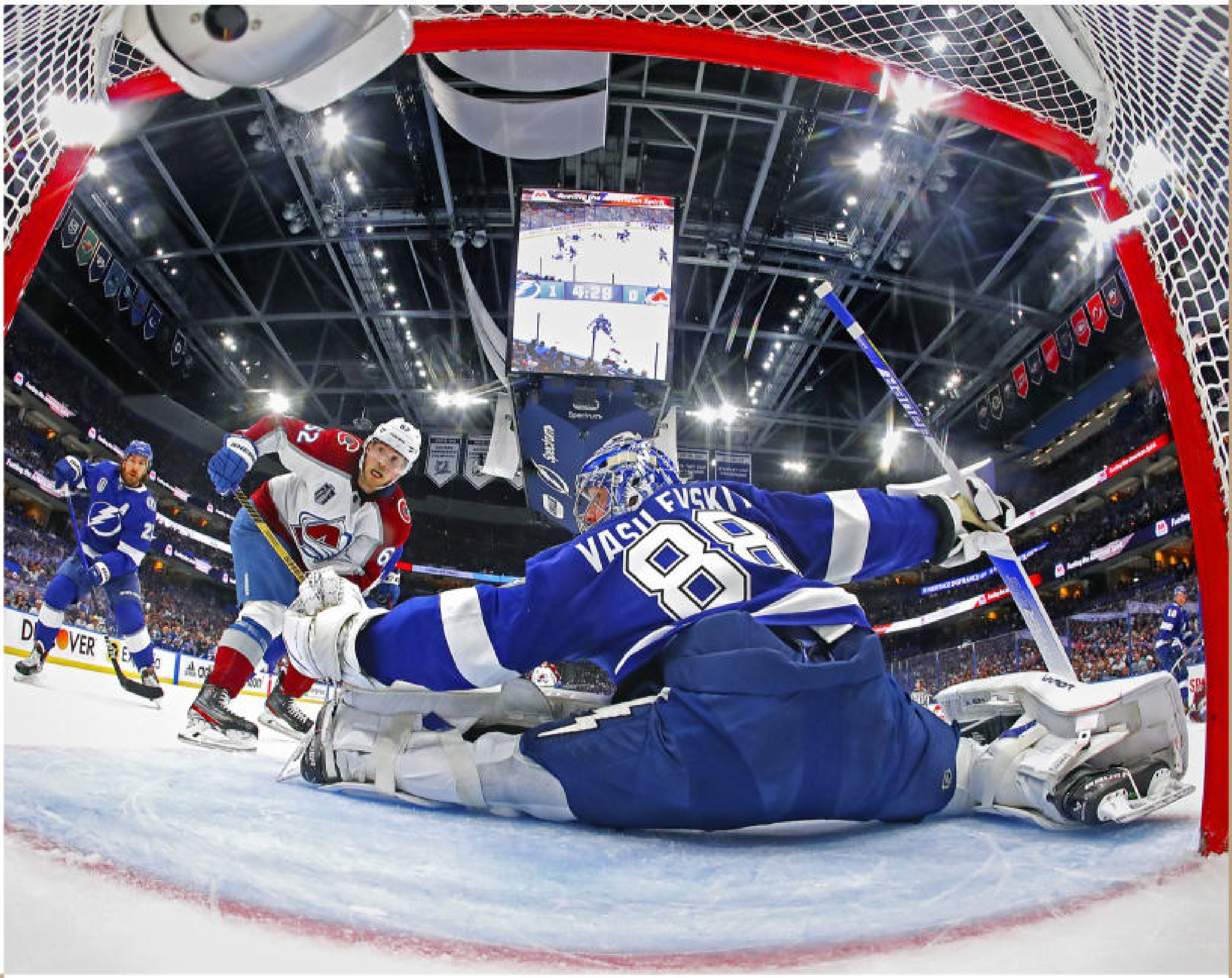
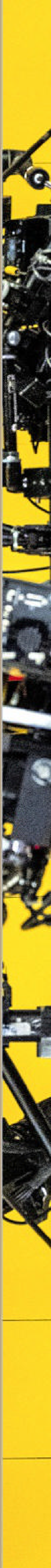
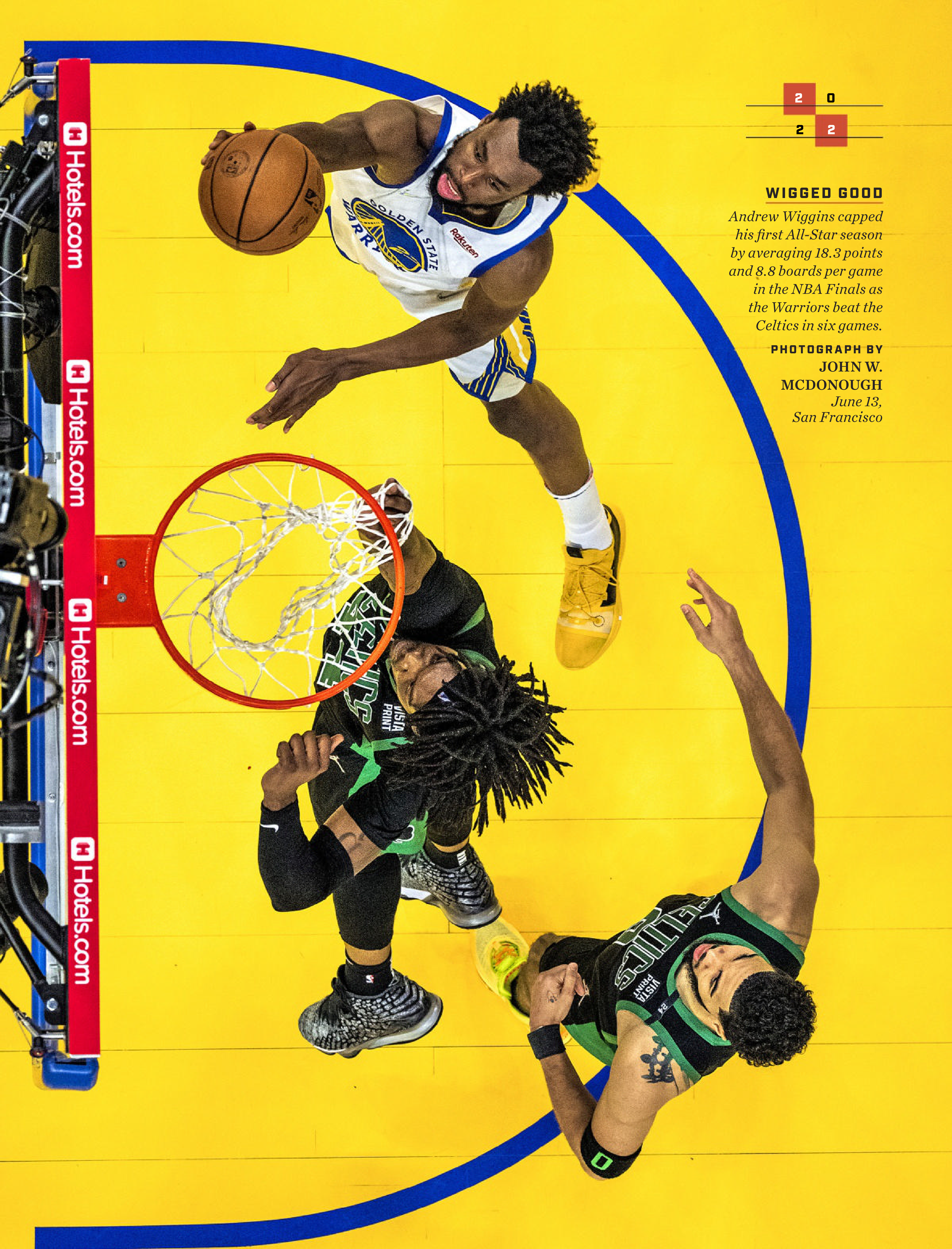

VASILEVSKIY
88

LANDSLIDE VICTORY

Artturi Lehkonen hit the post in the first period of Game 6 of the Stanley Cup Final but made no mistake in the second, scoring the series-winning goal as the Avalanche beat the Lightning.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
BRUCE BENNETT
GETTY IMAGES
June 26, Tampa

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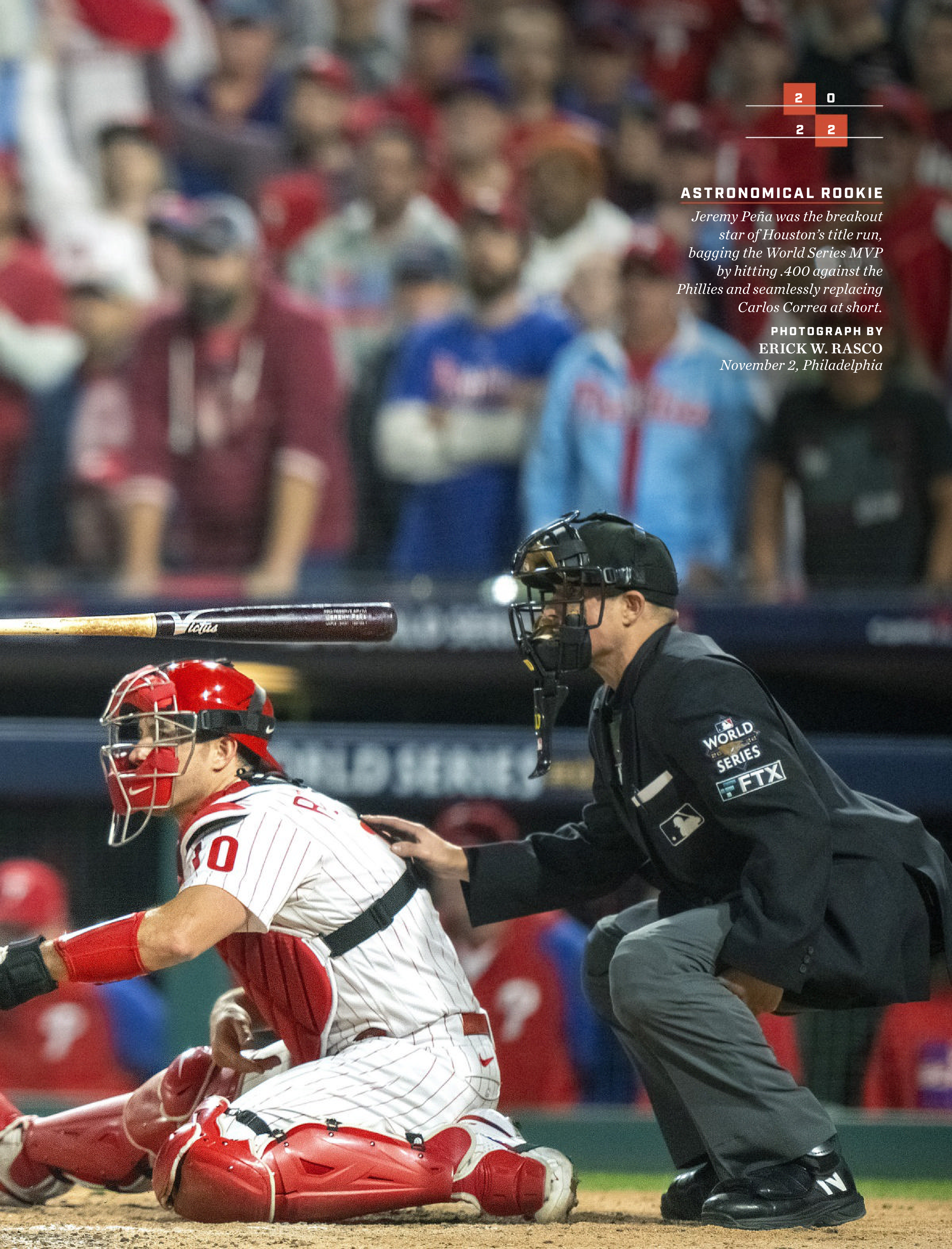
WIGGED GOOD

Andrew Wiggins capped his first All-Star season by averaging 18.3 points and 8.8 boards per game in the NBA Finals as the Warriors beat the Celtics in six games.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOHN W. MCDONOUGH
June 13, San Francisco

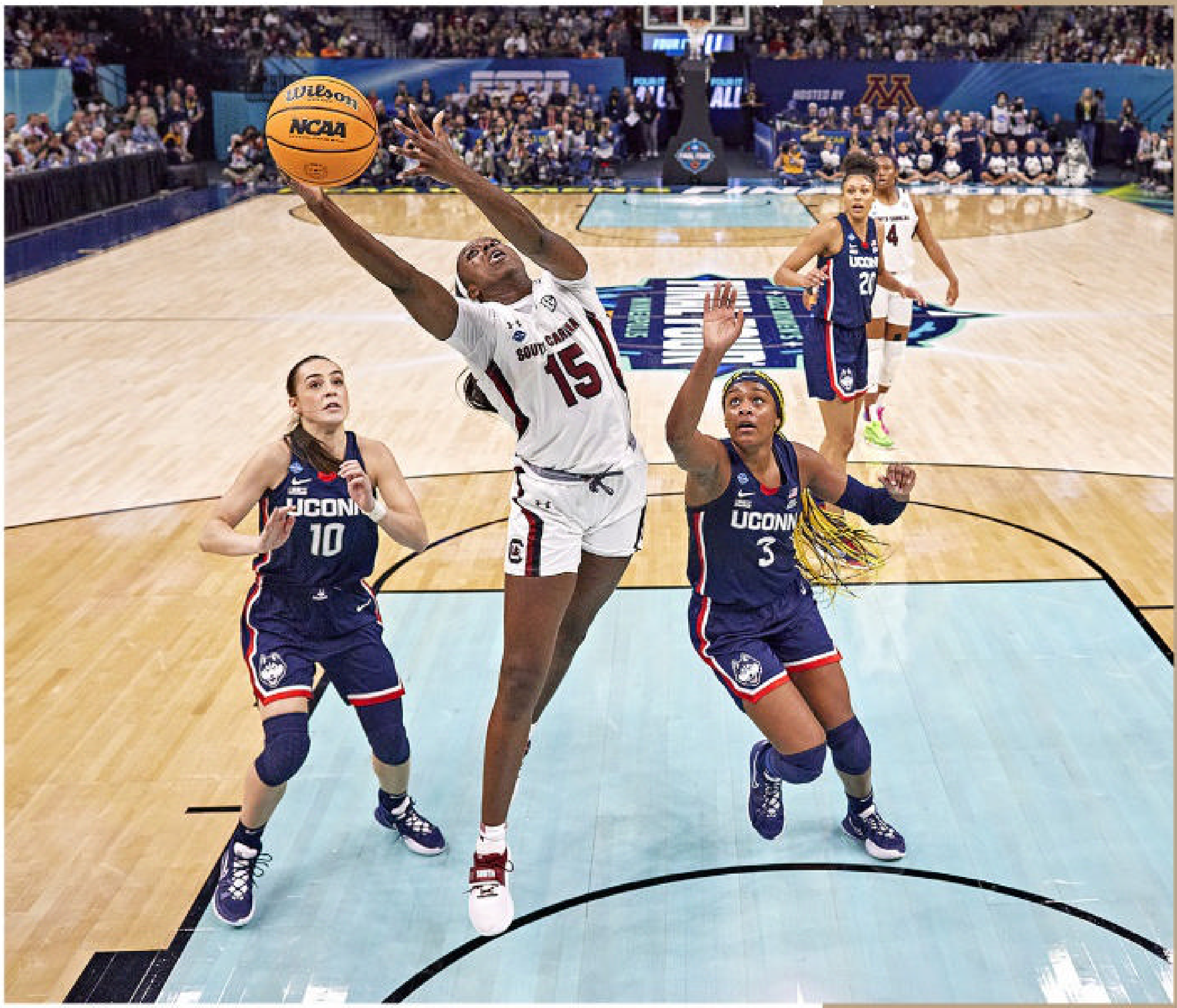
WORLD SERIES
3



ASTRONOMICAL ROOKIE

Jeremy Peña was the breakout star of Houston's title run, bagging the World Series MVP by hitting .400 against the Phillies and seamlessly replacing Carlos Correa at short.

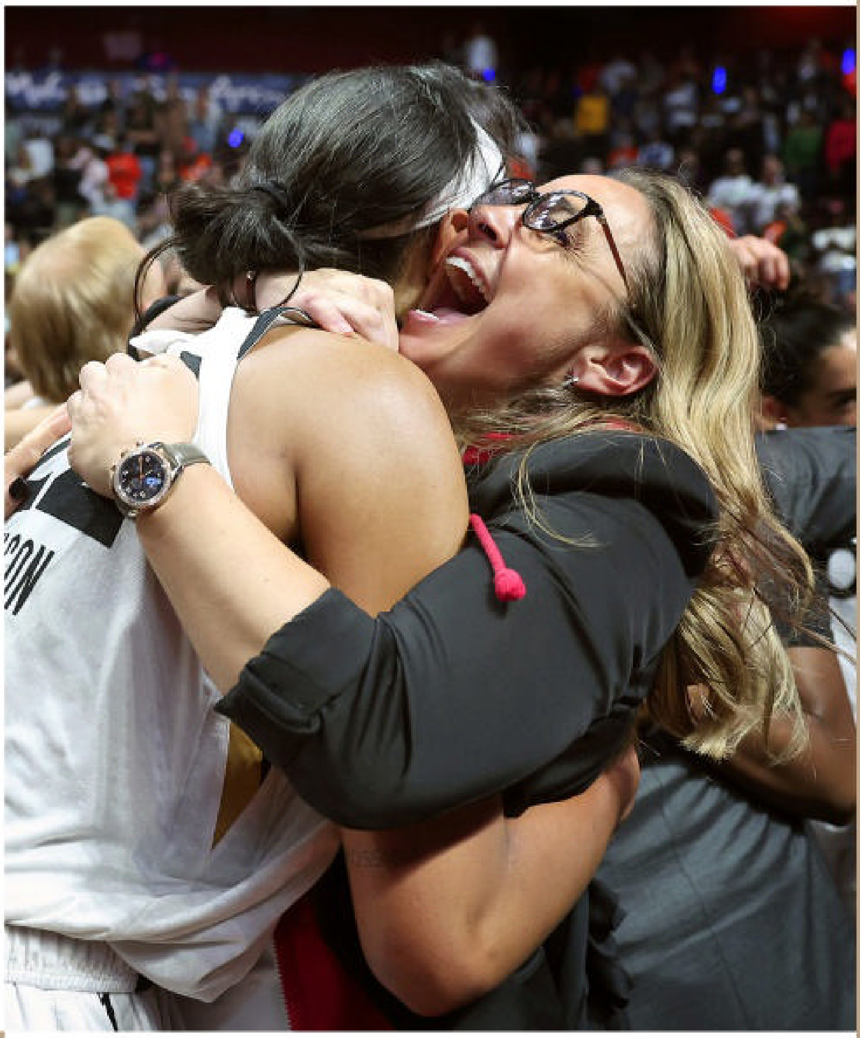
PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO
November 2, Philadelphia



MORE THAN GAME

Aliyah Boston (4) got plenty of help from her friends, like Laeticia Amihere (15), leading South Carolina to glory.

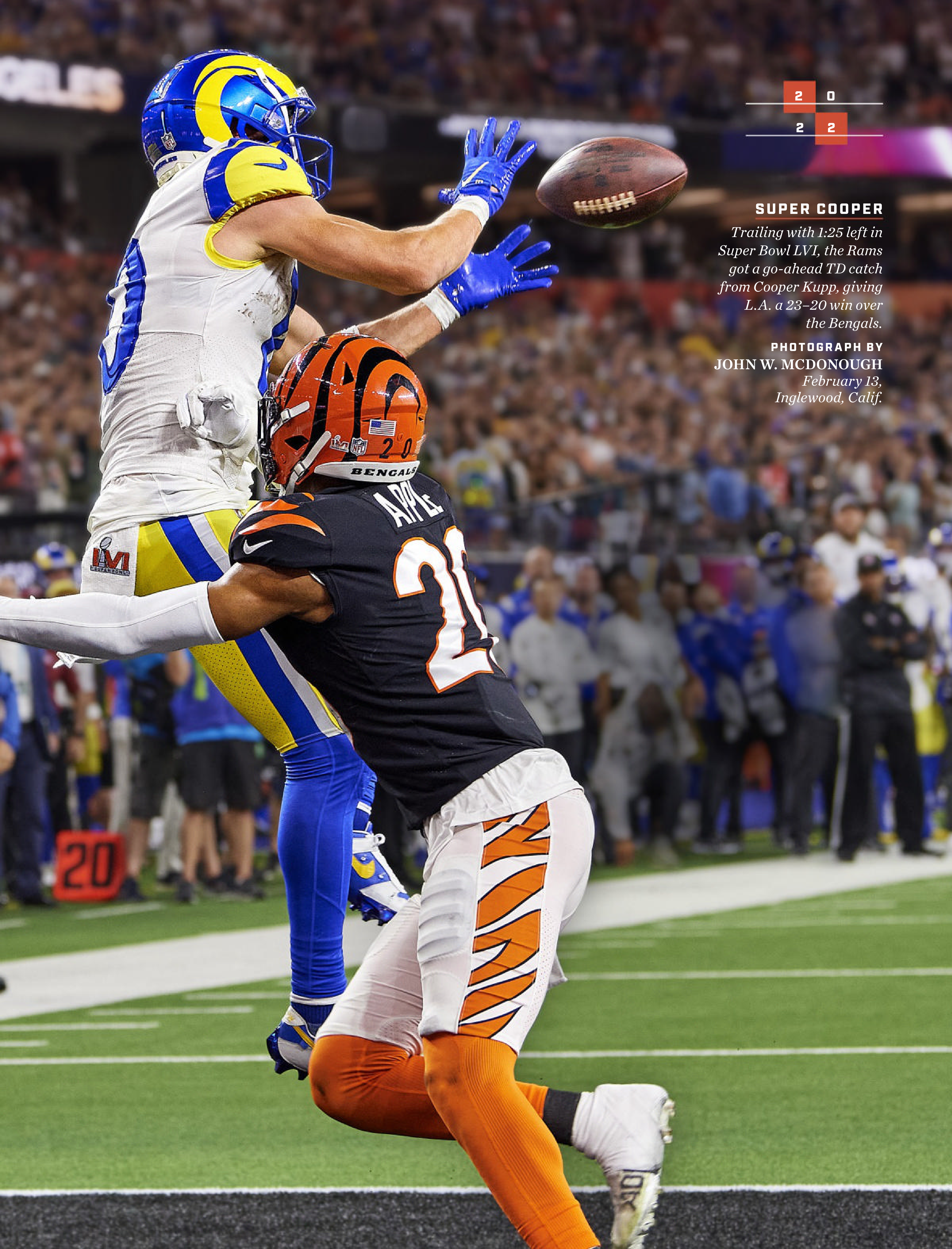
PHOTOGRAPH BY
DAVID E. KLUTHO *April 3, Minneapolis*



ACES GO WILD

Coach Becky Hammon embraced her star A'ja Wilson after Las Vegas won the WNBA title.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
MADDIE MEYER
GETTY IMAGES
September 18, Uncasville, Conn.



LVI
BENGALS
APPLE
20
20

SUPER COOPER

Trailing with 1:25 left in Super Bowl LVI, the Rams got a go-ahead TD catch from Cooper Kupp, giving L.A. a 23–20 win over the Bengals.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOHN W. MCDONOUGH
February 13,
Inglewood, Calif.

SCORECARD

NEWSMAKERS p. 20 | SI EATS p. 22 | YEAR IN MEDIA p. 24 | FACES IN THE CROWD p. 30

IT WAS A GAS

FLATULENT FOOTBALLERS? YEP. FRAUDULENT FISHERMEN? CHECK. THE YEAR 2022 GAVE US GREAT MOMENTS AND PERFORMANCES. THESE ARE NOT THEM

BY STEVE RUSHIN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RENAUD VIGOURT

FELONIOUS MONKFISH

Two fishermen were indicted in Cleveland on three felony charges for allegedly inserting weights into their prize catches in an effort to win $30,000 in a tournament.

AND AFTER ALL, THEY GO UNDER WALL

Clippers guard John Wall released his own line of underwear.

IF YOU CAN KEEP YOUR HEAD WHEN ALL ABOUT YOU ARE LOSING THEIRS

Ravens mascot Poe suffered a season-ending knee injury while playing in a youth football exhibition at halftime of the Ravens-Commanders game, yet managed to hold his head on as he was carted off the field in agony.

TROT NIXIN'

A junior college pitcher in Texas was dismissed from the team after tackling a home run hitter as he rounded third base.

I JUST DID

When asked about the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi—which U.S. intelligence said was approved by the Saudi crown prince—Greg Norman, CEO of the Saudi-backed LIV Golf tour, said: "Look, we've all made mistakes."

WHO WAS RUNNER-UP?

An umpire at a children's softball game in Laurel, Miss., was punched in the face by a woman who wore a T-shirt emblazoned MOTHER OF THE YEAR.

BUYER'S REMORSE

Less than 24 hours after a man paid $518,628 at auction for the "final touchdown ball" thrown by retired Buccaneers quarterback Tom Brady, Brady unretired. "I couldn't believe it," the bidder, a Miami real estate developer, told *Inside Edition*. "Is this possible? How could this be happening?" (The transaction was later voided.)

EXHIBITION STADIUM

A couple was captured on video apparently having sex during a Blue Jays–Cubs game at the top of the 500 level of Rogers Centre in Toronto.

ELSEWHERE IN THE AMERICAN LEAGUE

A couple was captured on video apparently having sex in the top row of Section 334 of RingCentral Coliseum during an A's-Mariners game in Oakland.

WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE

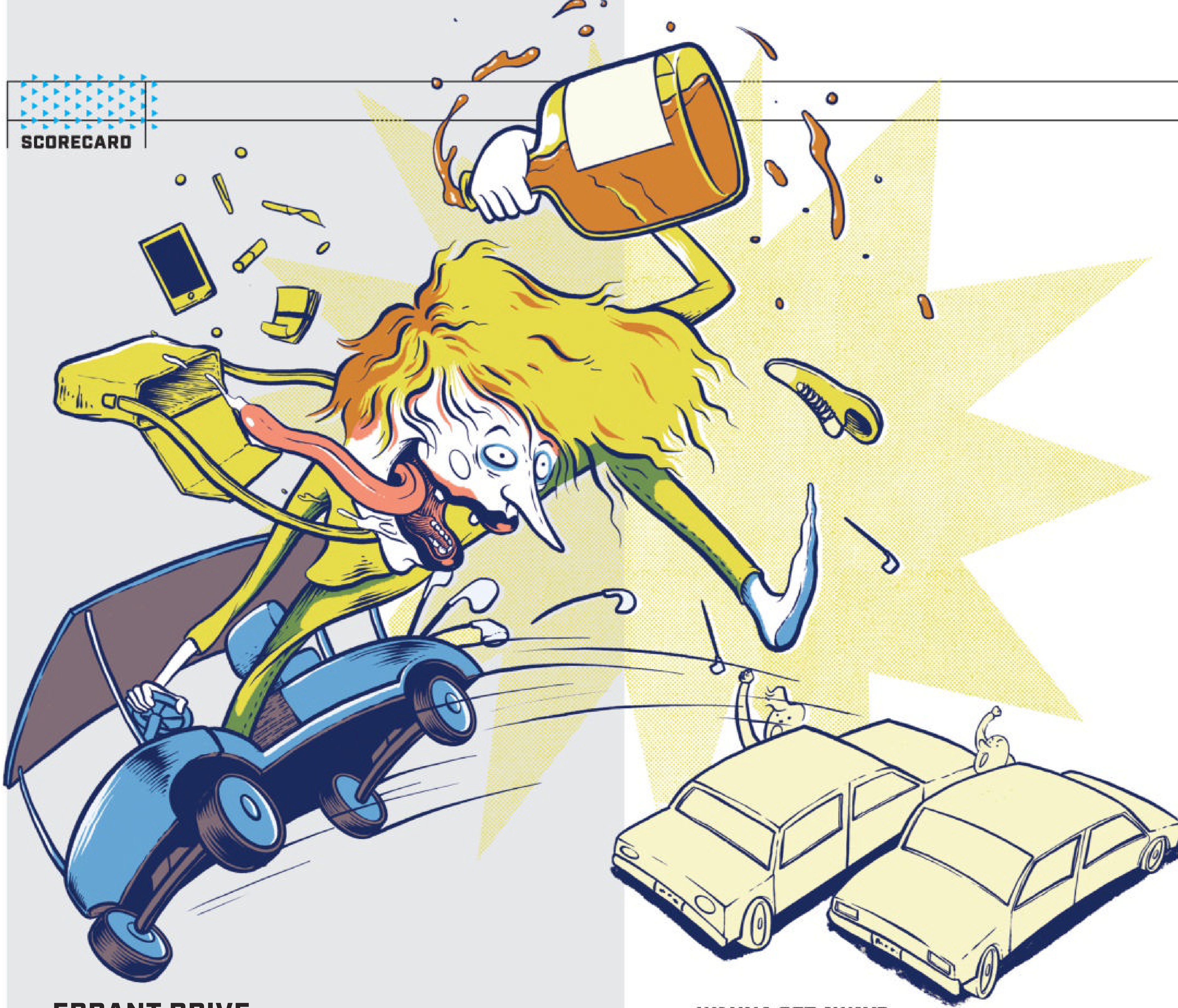
Jon Rahm, the No. 1–ranked golfer in the world, left a 10-inch putt seven inches short on the seventh hole at Bay Hill during the Arnold Palmer Invitational in March. Asked how, Rahm replied, "I really couldn't tell you."

TASTES LIKE MEAT

The COO of Beyond Meat was charged with felony battery after being accused of biting a man's nose outside an Arkansas football game in September.

BREAKING: WIND

A report on French soccer's top division began: "Brazilian defender Marcelo was dropped from the Lyon first team due to continuous farting and laughing in the dressing room, sources have told ESPN."



ERRANT DRIVE

A 58-year-old woman with an open bottle of Jack Daniels was arrested for driving a golf cart in the center lane of Interstate 95 in Brevard County, Fla.

FREE-RANGE FOUL

An animal rights activist who ran onto the field during a Rams-49ers game filed a police report accusing L.A. linebacker Bobby Wagner of "blatant assault" for knocking him to the ground.

I'LL CALL YOU FROM HOME

As Pirates infielder Rodolfo Castro slid headfirst into third base in a game in August, his phone popped out of his back pocket.

TWO-POINT SUBMERSION

After Tennessee beat Alabama for the first time in 16 years, Volunteers fans stormed the field, toppled a goalpost and dragged it out of Neyland Stadium before throwing it into the Tennessee River.

DON'T TRY THIS AT TENNESSEE

A demonstrator zip-tied himself to a goalpost during the Everton-Newcastle game in March and had to be removed with bolt cutters.

WANNA GET AWAY?

After admiring his deep drive to left field, third baseman Delvin Perez of the Triple A Memphis Redbirds flipped his bat and took a triumphant home run trot, pointing to the sky after rounding second before learning—10 yards from home plate—that the ball had been caught on the warning track.

(SLOWLY) POUR ONE OUT

After the Steelers sold new naming rights to their stadium, formerly known as Heinz Field, workers removed two 35-foot tall ketchup bottles from the facade, a solemn ceremony opposed by nearly 10,000 signatories to a petition protesting the name change to Acrisure Stadium.

QUID PRO BRO

Asked by the chair umpire to identify the allegedly disruptive spectator he wanted removed from his Wimbledon final against Novak Djokovic, Nick Kyrgios replied: “The one who looks like she’s had about 700 drinks, bro.”

I SAW YOU ON COURT, NOW I’LL SEE YOU IN COURT

The woman who was asked to leave is a lawyer and opened legal proceedings against Kyrgios for defamation. (The case was settled in November after Kyrgios, who lost the final, apologized and made a donation to a charity of the woman’s choice.)

HOME IS WHERE YOU HANG YOUR HARD HAT

The Indian Pond Country Club in Kingston, Mass., appealed a jury verdict that awarded $4.93 million to a family whose yard and house, overlooking the club’s 15th green, had been pelted by 651 golf balls since 2017.

A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

The Red Wings’ longtime Zamboni driver, famous for waving octopuses in the air to fire up the crowd, filed a wrongful termination suit against the team, which fired him, the suit said, for urinating in an ice runoff drain while on the job.

COULD YOU BE MORE SPECIFIC?

When a reporter asked Fernando Tatis Jr. about his offseason motorcycle accident—Tatis reported to spring training with a fractured left wrist—the Padres’ shortstop replied: “Which one?”

FROST ADVISORY

Cross-country skier Remi Lindholm of Finland suffered what he described as “a little bit frozen” penis during the 50-kilometer freestyle race at the Beijing Olympics, though Stephen Colbert said the “official medical diagnosis” was “chilly willy.”

FOOL ME TWICE

Lindholm said it was the second time it had happened to him and told Finnish media, per *The Guardian*: “When the body parts started to warm after the finish, the pain was unbearable.”

VENDOR BENDER

A traffic accident in Florida scattered hundreds of cans of Coors Light across I-75, months after a wreck in Pennsylvania spilled a truckload of hot dog filler onto I-70.

DON’T LEAVE ME HANGIN’

A woman using an inversion table at a 24-hour gym in Berea, Ohio, became stuck upside down at 3 a.m. and had to call 911 from her smartwatch—declaring, in a TikTok video she posted of the incident: “Oh, dear lord, my ankles are burning.”

CHECKMATE

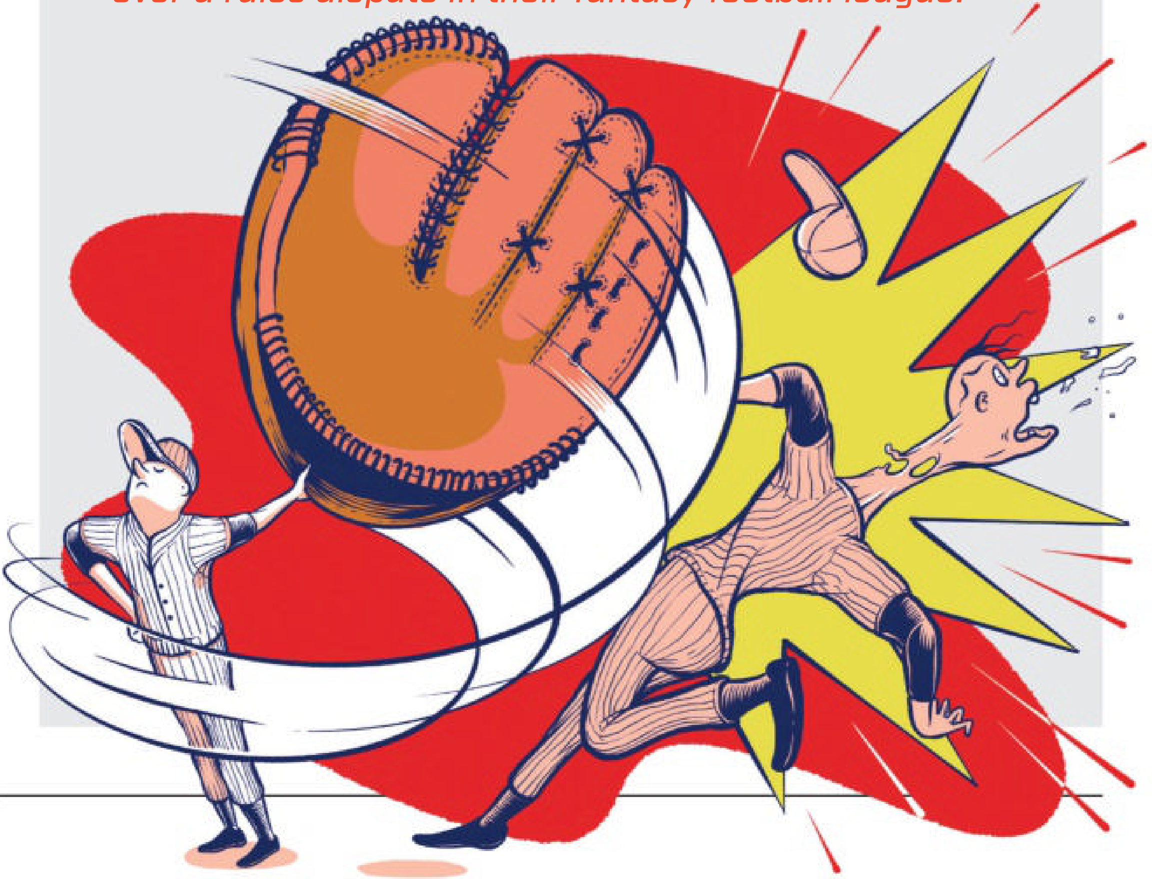
During a match in Moscow, a chess-playing robot abruptly grabbed and broke the finger of his opponent, a 7-year-old boy.

WAIT TILL HE PLAYS THE RUSSIAN ROBOT

Chess was engulfed in scandal after Chess.com accused grandmaster Hans Niemann of likely cheating in more than 100 online games. (Niemann sued the site and another accuser for $100 million.)

PHAMILY FEUD

Reds outfielder Tommy Pham slapped Giants outfielder Joc Pederson before a game in Cincinnati over a rules dispute in their fantasy football league.



NEWSMAKERS

BEDDING ODDS

THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS MATTRESS SALESMAN KEEPS WAGERING ON HIMSELF

DANIEL SHIREY/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

OF ALL the images associated with the Astros' World Series win, few will linger longer than footage of 71-year-old Jim McIngvale's carting $10 million in cash—a small chunk of the money he won betting on Houston—to his private jet in a wheelbarrow. McIngvale *(above)*, who's better known as Mattress Mack, has been placing huge bets for years. Occasionally he'll use them to hedge the promotions he runs at Gallery Furniture, the franchise he started out of a tent under a highway 40 years ago.

During the season, Mack announced that anyone who spent $3,000 at his stores would get double their money back if the Astros won the World Series. Since gambling is illegal in Texas, he had to cross state lines, which is why he was in a Subway parking lot one day dropping $3 million on his favorite team. When all his bets came in, Mack had won $75 million (on $10 million in bets), believed to be the largest legal take in history.

Not every bet this year hit for Mack. In May he put $1.5 million on Epicenter to win the Kentucky Derby, then watched as the horse came in second behind an 80–1 shot. McIngvale also placed a series of wagers on the Bengals to win Super Bowl LVI against the Rams. The game cost him $9.5 million, but he said he sold $20 million worth of recliners in a promo that would have required him to reimburse patrons who bought a recliner before the game. He also dropped $1.2 million when Alabama lost to Georgia in the CFP title game.

Mack has been running furniture-related promotions since the Astros' first World Series run, in 2017, but he's been invested in sports results for decades. In November, Andy Roddick revealed that when he was too young to rent a car at the 2002 U.S. Clay Court Championships in Houston, McIngvale's wife, Linda, told Roddick he could borrow one and keep it if he won the tournament—which he did. —*Mark Bechtel*

SI SPORTSBOOK

Taking the Under

Lobbyists spent $460 million on California's dueling ballot initiatives—one that would allow betting on apps and one that would restrict it to Native American casinos *[SI, October 2022]*. Ads flooded the airwaves until weeks before the election, when both groups finally read the writing on the wall: Their gamble had failed, as neither proposition came close. The app-based initiative lost by a resounding 82–18 margin, the other by 67–33. That means any aspiring Mattress Macks will have to drive to Nevada for their action—at least until '24, when millions more are sure to be spent.

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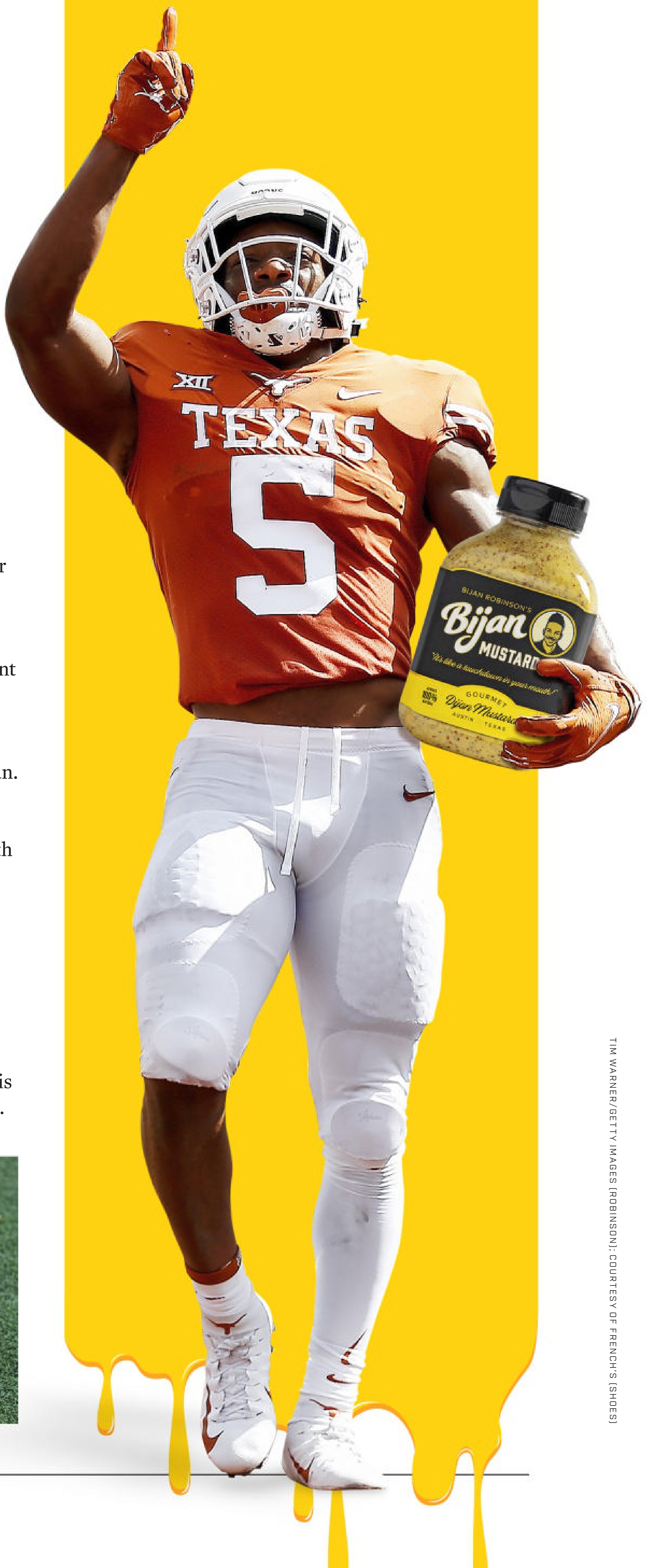
MUSTARD, MUSTERED

COLLEGE ATHLETES ARE RACKING UP FOOD-RELATED NIL DEALS, AND ONE CONDIMENT IS PROVING ESPECIALLY POPULAR

ONE OF the most popular industries in the NIL space is food, which makes sense. College kids are notorious for trying to find budget-friendly grub, and NIL deals allow businesses to compensate athletes with free meals in exchange for promotion: *Post a picture of the offensive line enjoying wings, and they're on us.*

Some deals go deeper, though. Arkansas golfer John Daly II inked a deal with Hooters, an establishment inexorably linked with his father. Alabama football player Kool-Aid McKinstry signed on with his eponymous fruit punch manufacturer. Kansas QB Jason Bean now endorses legume purveyor Serious Bean. (It doesn't quite reach the level of Nebraska wideout Decoldest Crawford's air conditioning deal or North Carolina forward Leaky Black's partnership with a local plumber, but it's still pretty good.)

Two of the most interesting deals, though, involve the same condiment: mustard. Tennessee QB Hendon Hooker has teamed up with French's, which became synonymous with the program last year when a bottle was thrown onto the field in protest of a call against Ole Miss. (Hendon's deal includes custom shoes.) But the ultimate food-related NIL masterpiece comes from Texas running back Bijan Robinson, who is now pushing his own Dijon: Bijan Mustardson. —M.B.



TIM WARNER/GETTY IMAGES (ROBINSON); COURTESY OF FRENCH'S (SHOES)

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YEAR IN MEDIA

TRUE GRIT

THE YEAR'S BEST TV SHOW REVAMPED A REVERED FILM, INJECTING ISSUES AROUND RACE AND SEXUALITY ITS CHARACTERS WOULD HAVE FACED

BY MARK BECHTEL

COURTESY OF AMAZON PRIME

WATCH

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

Thirty years after its release, Penny Marshall's movie *A League of Their Own* remains a beloved family classic, and for good reason. But as it's aged, it's become more noticeable that the original—save for one scene—ignores the experience of Black women and sidesteps the idea that any player (even one played by Rosie O'Donnell) might be anything but straight.

Still, the movie's enduring popularity made it ripe for a reboot, one that features a little more edge and a wider scope than the original. Abbi Jacobson and Will Graham have created a series for Amazon Prime that features two equally powerful story lines. One focuses on the members of the all-white Rockford Peaches—their play on the field as well as their romantic entanglements, many of which are intrasquad.

The second features Chanté Adams as Max Chapman, a beautician's daughter who wants nothing more than to play ball. Adams *(right)* was initially puzzled when she was offered an audition, given the original's lack of Black faces. "I definitely remembered the movie," Adams says. "But I also remembered the one iconic scene of a Black woman in the movie because that was like the 30 seconds that I got to see myself within the film."

But Adams was intrigued by her character's arc, which focuses on Max's relationship with her mother (who disapproves of baseball), her sexuality and simply navigating life as a Black woman in the Midwest in the 1940s. At times baseball seems like an afterthought; Max barely touches a ball until halfway through the eight-episode season.

League doesn't gloss over the difficulties faced by Max and those in her orbit, but neither does it ignore the flip side of the ugliness. "When you think of Black life during the Jim Crow era, usually the first thing you see when it comes to film and television is pain, struggle and torture on Black bodies," says Adams. "We wanted to highlight Black love, Black joy

ROCKFORD TOOL

and a successful Black family." (Indeed, maybe the best scene in the series involves the quest of Max and her friend Clance to procure crabs for a crab boil. To be honest, a show about Max and Clance doing nothing but trying to buy seafood would be amazing to watch.)

To learn about the 1940s Black experience, Adams, who grew up in Detroit, delved into her family's history. (Many of the photos in Max's house are of Adams's own relatives.) To prepare for the baseball, she and the rest of the cast were put through two boot camps.

Mild spoiler: The camp was one of the few times that she actually interacted with the actors who play the Peaches. To their credit, Jacobson and Graham never fully merge the two story lines. It's a perfect Hollywood setup: Black pitcher wins over white players, who then give an impassioned speech to commissioner, who relents and allows her into the league. But that never happened in the 1940s, so it doesn't happen here.

Instead, the season ends with Jacobson's character, who has begun a relationship with a teammate, pondering the state of her marriage, and with Max trying to push ahead with baseball without blowing up that family joy.

Like the original, it's wonderful to watch. Only this time it feels a little fuller, a little more real.

MONEY TALKS

A PAIR OF SHOWS TAKE DIFFERENT TACKS IN TELLING FIFA'S SCANDAL-LADEN HISTORY

NEW

WITH WORLD CUP season upon us, fans looking for a reminder of how abjectly corrupt international soccer is are in luck: They've got options! Netflix's *FIFA Uncovered* is an exhaustive four-part documentary (which probably should have been a punchier three-part documentary) focusing heavily on the bidding processes for the Cups in Russia and Qatar. It does, however, spend some time on the history of the governing body, highlighting the misdeeds of João Havelange, the longtime FIFA president.

Havelange is at the heart of the second season of Amazon Prime's terrific *El Presidente*, a dramatization of the 2015 FIFA corruption scandal created by Armando Bó, the Oscar-winning screenwriter of *Birdman*. Sick of being looked down upon by the European officials who ran FIFA, the Brazilian-born Havelange mobilized South American and African nations to win the federation's presidency in 1974. He ran the body for 24 years, growing the World Cup immensely by bringing sponsors on board and aligning himself with the occasional South American junta if need be. And lining his pockets at every turn.

It might not sound like a fun watch, but it is. *El Presidente* is smart and raucous, a series that shows how FIFA became the mess that it is that without inspiring bouts of hand-wringing from the audience.

NOTABLE

In a year without *Ted Lasso*, fans were able to satisfy their fish-out-of-water jones with Hulu's ***WELCOME TO WREXHAM***, a surprisingly touching series about struggling club Wrexham United after it was bought by Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney.

Journalists are taught not to become the story, but we'll forgive Marty Smith. The amiable cohost of ESPN's ***MARTY AND MCGEE***, one of the year's most consistently enjoyable shows, set a world record on Nov. 5 when he drained a 76-foot cornhole shot.

HBO's *Winning Time* frequently went over the top, often to its detriment. But **JOHN C. REILLY** thrived going broad in a perfect role: Lakers owner Jerry Buss. Reilly brought touches of *Boogie Nights* and *Walk Hard* to his performance, which was uniquely brilliant.

COURTESY OF AMAZON PRIME [EL PRESIDENTE]; COURTESY OF HBO [REILLY]

NOTABLE

Baseball fans are certain to eat up the archival footage in ***SAY HEY, WILLIE MAYS!*** But the best thing about the excellent HBO doc is the Kid himself reminiscing about his career and his place in history. May we all look so spry and happy in our early 90s.

Oscar winner **MARK RYLANCE** delivered the year's best performance in a sports movie in *The Phantom of the Open*, the true story of a duffer who conned his way into the 1976 British Open. It's a funny story, but Rylance brought ample empathy to it.

It was a good year on the Adam Sandler front. Not only were we not subjected to another *Grown Ups* sequel, but Sandler's performance as a wearied basketball scout in ***HUSTLE*** once again served as a reminder of how good he can be when he tries, you know, acting.

COURTESY OF LAURA RADFORD/NETFLIX [THE SWIMMERS]; COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES CLASSICS [PHANTOM OF THE OPEN]

HIGH WATER

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF A SWIMMER'S JOURNEY GETS THE HOLLYWOOD TREATMENT

NEW

AS ELEVATOR PITCHES go, you could do a lot worse than *Olympic swimmer pulls a boatful of refugees to safety*. In 2015, Yusra Mardini and her sister Sara left war-torn Syria. Their journey took them to Turkey, where they crowded onto an overloaded dinghy that broke down en route to the island of Lesbos. Yusra and Sara end up hauling the boat to safety. That's just one step on their journey to Germany, where they eventually found asylum and where Yusra was able to resume training for the Olympics. (She competed in 2016 and '20.)

If there's a flaw with the new Netflix release *The Swimmers*, it's that the film occasionally tries to wring too much out of that story. When Yusra's pool is hit by a missile strike, we know it's traumatic without an extended shot of her screaming underwater as an unexploded bomb sinks to the bottom. But that's largely nitpicking. Real-life sisters Nathalie and Manal Issa—neither of whom knew how to swim before being cast—deliver powerful performances. Director Sally El Hosaini has made a film that is visually striking, and one that it is at times a harrowing drama, a meditation on the plight of oppressed people and a good old-fashioned uplifting sports movie—without succumbing to the familiar tropes that have ruined so many films in each of those genres.

SLEEPING GIANTS

AN INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER LOOKS AT HOW THE U.S. MEN'S SOCCER TEAM CAN BE ROUSED

NEW

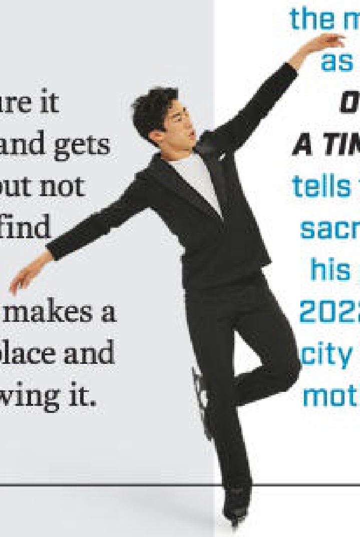
EVER SINCE the U.S. lost to Trinidad and Tobago in its final qualifier for the 2018 World Cup *(above)*, keeping the Yanks from making the trip to Russia, barrels of ink have been spilled and countless pixels have been, well, pixelated about what went wrong—how a country that dominates so many sports could be so unsuccessful at the world's most popular game. Anyone who has followed George Dohrmann on social media knows he's not shy about sharing his feelings about the state of soccer in the United States. Twitter, of course, is made for 280-character hot takes, and Dohrmann can fling them. But give him the time and space to dig into an issue and, as *Switching Fields* shows, the Pulitzer Prize–winning investigative reporter has few equals.

Dohrmann's new book isn't a postmortem on one particular failed qualifying cycle. Rather, it's a meditation on what can be done to ensure it doesn't happen again. Nor is it a series of riffs; it's doggedly reported and gets at a host of subjects: Why does the U.S. dominate the women's game but not the men's? Why has an ethnically diverse nation historically failed to find ways to include players from outside of the suburbs? How has bad youth soccer coaching led to failure at higher levels? *Switching Fields* makes a strong case that these mistakes can be rectified. The resources are in place and the blueprint is there. Now, coming out of Qatar, it's a matter of following it.

NOTABLE

Sometimes you do want to see how the sausage is made. Case in point: writer and director Ron Shelton's wonderful ***THE CHURCH OF BASEBALL***, a look at the making of *Bull Durham*. It's part Hollywood deep dive and part memoir of worshipping at the pastime's altar.

Lots of people will tell you what to do to raise an athlete. In ***QUARTERBACK DADS***, Teddy Greenstein offers something more important: how not to go about being a sports parent. More cautionary tale than how-to, the book is an indispensable eye-opener.



Nathan Chen is one of the most decorated skaters of all time—and one of the most thoughtful, as evidenced by ***ONE JUMP AT A TIME***. The memoir tells the story of the sacrifices made on his path to gold in 2022 in Beijing, the city from which his mother emigrated.

ASHLEY ALLEN/GETTY IMAGES (SOCCER); ERICK W. RASCO (CHEN)

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FACES IN THE CROWD

Photograph by
JORDAN NAHOLOWA'A MURPH

JULIETTE WHITTAKER AND ROISIN WILLIS

School: **Stanford**

Hometown (Whittaker): **Laurel, Md.**

Hometown (Willis): **Stevens Point, Wis.**

Date of Birth (Whittaker): **Dec. 1, 2003**

Date of Birth (Willis): **Aug. 6, 2004**

GOING INTO their first indoor track and field season at Stanford, Juliette Whittaker *(above, left)* and Roisin Willis are rarely found apart. The freshmen train together, and when they're not working out, they're either hanging out in each other's room, talking in the athlete dining center for hours or laughing about Willis's prerace antics before the World Junior Championships in August.

"We were in the warmup area with all the other athletes, and Roisin pulls out [these] balls and starts juggling when everyone's getting ready for their races," Whittaker recalls. Willis adds, "I just threw everybody off."

For almost two years Whittaker and Willis maintained a long-distance friendship that never veered toward rivalry, even when they were one-upping each other on the track. Willis broke the girls' indoor 800-meter high school record (2:00.06) in February; in June, Whittaker set the girls' outdoor 800 high school mark (1:59.04). Willis then won gold in the 800 at the worlds, in Cali, Colombia, setting a meet record (1:59.13), while Whittaker took bronze.

They became closer friends instead, savoring the few meets where they'd get to see each other (they watched *Dance Moms* together on their recent trip to worlds). The duo now live one floor apart in the same dorm—only because Stanford doesn't allow freshmen athletes to room together. Whittaker describes Willis as "very humble. Probably most of the people that we've met on campus don't know she's a world champion." Willis calls Whittaker "incredibly bubbly and positive but also very hardworking."

"It's surreal; I don't think it's sunk in yet that the next meet we go to we're going to be racing in the same uniform," Whittaker says. "Which is something that I've always dreamed of." —*Emily Schumacher*

AIR RIFLE

ON HER MARK

▸ **DOWN A** shot in the 10-meter Air Rifle World Championship in Cairo, Alison Weisz needed to win back-to-back rounds to secure gold. She defeated China's Huang Yuting to become the first U.S. woman to win an individual rifle world title since 1979. "I couldn't really feel emotions because I was just in shock," says Weisz, 27, who also won silver in the 10-meter team air rifle event.

Weisz's gold earned Team USA a spot in the 2024 Paris Games. The Belgrade, Mont., native, who made her Olympic debut in Tokyo, serves in the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit at Fort Benning, Ga., which she credits for helping her mental game.

"It's a really unique opportunity to push your limits. Having that mental mindset of, how far can I go?" —*Carlos Stinson-Maas*

TREY HOLLY ▸Sport: **Football** ▸Hometown: **Farmerville, La.**

Holly, a senior running back at Union Parish High, rushed for 225 yards and three touchdowns in a 35–19 defeat of Carroll High, leading the Farmers to their first district title since 2015. The LSU commit eclipsed Louisiana's all-time rushing record (8,704) in a 62–12 defeat of Bastrop High earlier in the season. Holly totaled 2,107 rushing yards and 29 TDs on 222 carries this fall, topping 100 rushing yards in nine of 10 games.

MYA MAACK ▸Sport: **Soccer** ▸Hometown: **Laurel, Mont.**

Mya, a senior forward at Laurel High, had four goals in a 6–0 defeat of Lone Peak High, breaking the state's all-class boys and girls career scoring record (118). A Rocky Mountain College commit, Mya ended her season with 27 goals. She set the state's single-season scoring mark (43) in 2021 and led Laurel to three state titles.

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@si.com**.

For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@Faces_SI** on Twitter.

GARYANG KIM/ISSF (WEISZ); COURTESY OF JOE SPATAFORA (HOLLY); COURTESY OF TOM MAACK (MAACK)

STEPHEN

CURRY

2022 SPORTSPERSON *of the* **YEAR** Sports Illustrated

BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

PHOTOGRAPH BY KOHJIRO KINNO

An elusive Finals MVP award. A long-awaited college degree. Continued charitable works. Stephen Curry accomplished it all—and more—in 2022, reminding the world how to be a winner

STYLING BY
JASON BOLDEN
GROOMING BY
YUSEF

STEPHEN CURRY walked to the bench lugging a superstar's dilemma: He had played poorly, but his team was going to win. Seventy-nine seconds remained in Game 5 of an NBA Finals that had been framed—to an illogical degree, in Curry's mind—as a referendum on Curry's career. If he was truly one of the best players of all time, why hadn't he won a Finals MVP award? Curry is driven by winning and by lifting others—motivations that are fraternal, not identical, twins. The Warriors would win this game, but he had not lifted them. Curry sat down next to coach Steve Kerr, at the intersection of pride and selflessness. He seemed, Kerr says, "pensive more than anything."

As much as ever, Curry was in the spotlight, and yet still people did not really see him. If he thinks about his place in history, he never says it, and he found the Finals MVP conversation annoying: "It bothered me that I had to answer to it. It didn't bother me that it wasn't on my résumé yet." The idea that he is lacking something is foreign to him. The implication that he needed to prove himself on the biggest stage was silly.

Curry is a boisterously ostentatious performer, and confidence is his oxygen. He once missed his first nine three-point attempts in a playoff game and when he sank the 10th he shimmied. As the Celtics finished off Game 3 to take a 2–1 series lead, Curry told them to their faces to enjoy their last win. Then he told his childhood friend, Omar Carter, he wanted to celebrate in Boston—meaning the Warriors would win three straight and wrap up the title in Game 6. Now they had won Game 4 and were about to take Game 5 in San Francisco.

Kerr turned to his star.

"This is like the best thing that possibly could have happened," Kerr said.

"What do you mean?" Curry asked.

"We just won this game going away when you had a tough night," Kerr said. "Do you know how that makes Boston feel?"

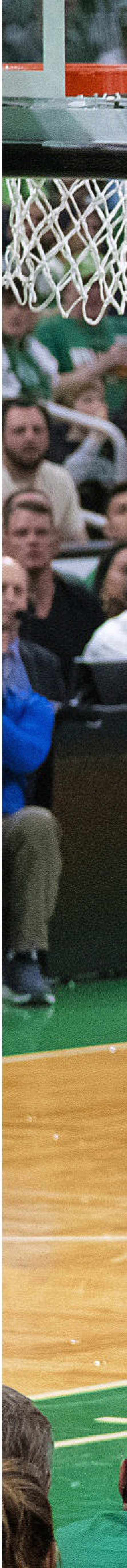
Curry thought about it, agreed his coach was right and made the kind of small recalibration that comes so easily to him. Before this year, Curry had not won a playoff game since 2019. His Splash Brother, Klay Thompson, had missed two and a half seasons because of injuries. Curry turned 34 in March. After Game 5, in his suite under the Chase Center, Curry received another reminder of time passing: His college coach, Bob McKillop, informed him he was retiring.

Curry came out in Game 6 and made the Celtics feel even worse: 34 points on 21 shots, seven rebounds, seven assists, two steals, one block and one more championship. It required an indomitability even beyond what he showed in winning two MVPs and his first three championships. He calls it his "greatest moment," and even this modest brag is so unlike Curry that his wife, Ayesha, says, "Really—he said that?" At the Warriors' afterparty, in a club underneath TD Garden, Ayesha said, "I'm so proud of you! You did it!" Steph corrected her: "*We* did it."

Curry knew people had said the Warriors were finished. He says, "I'm an internalizer. I internalized that throughout the entire year, the last three years. . . . Just let it marinate." In the euphoria after Game 6, he uttered one of the most viral sports comments of the year:

"What are they gonna say now?"

It was interpreted as Curry shutting up the doubters. He was also dismissing the nitpicky nature of the whole Finals MVP criticism. Curry admits, "I definitely log receipts," as most greats do, but he does it only because the receipts are useful. As a lightly recruited kid and overlooked



GREG NELSON

FINISHING TOUCH
After missing the Warriors' final 12 games, Curry showed no ill effects in leading his team past Boston.

GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS
30
Rakuten
CELTICS
7
SMART
36
LOONEY
5

young NBA player, he was easily motivated. After he became a widely praised superstar, he had to manufacture reasons to bust his ass in January and July, even though he knew it was just a motivational game he was playing with himself.

"It's like a hybrid car," Curry says. "Once the juice runs out, you gotta go to the reserve tank a little bit."

He says the ensuing discussion about slaying his haters was "almost a little awkward." The story of the Finals became about how critics had affected Steph Curry. But the story of his life is how he affects everybody else.

■

THIS IS WHAT Steph Curry did this year: He won his fourth championship. He won that Finals MVP award after scoring an efficient 31.2 points per game against the best defensive team in the league. He graduated from Davidson, 13 years after he left for the NBA following his junior season. He expanded his charitable reach: Since 2019, the Eat.Learn.Play. Foundation he and Ayesha founded has served more than 25 million meals to food-insecure children, spent $2.5 million on literacy-focused grants and distributed 500,000 books, according to Curry's representatives. He has also provided seed funding for men's and women's golf teams at Howard University, a historically Black school, and started the Underrated Golf Tour, a junior circuit designed to make the game more inclusive. He is co-chair of Michelle Obama's When We All Vote initiative. And now we name him SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's Sportsperson of the Year. Curry, who also shared the award with the 2017–18 Warriors, joins LeBron James, Tom Brady and Tiger Woods as the only multiple-time winners. We salute him this year not just for what he did, but for how he did it.

On a daily basis, Curry pulls off one of the toughest tricks in sports: He passionately seeks greatness without being consumed by it. He reminds us that stardom is not a license to be a jerk, and being a jerk is not a prerequisite for stardom. Longtime NBA fans can recite many stories about Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant belittling teammates to motivate them. There are no such stories about Curry. He can go weeks without giving anybody a pep talk, and, when he does, it's usually pretty short: *Come on! Lock in!*

"Winning is fun," Curry says. "We all know that. But to do it in a way that people speak on our culture, speak on my leadership, you

Steph of Legends

LEADING THE WARRIORS TO FOUR TITLES HAS PUT CURRY IN RAREFIED AIR

2015

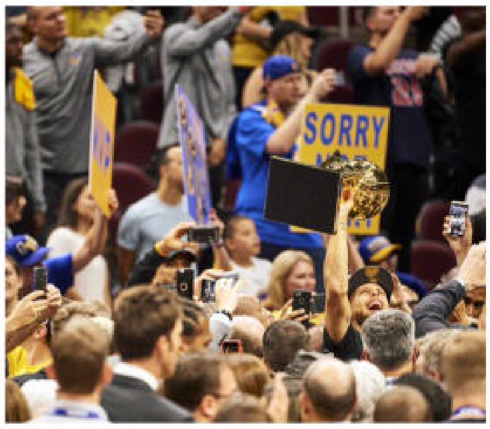
In his first Finals, Curry averaged 26.0 points, 6.3 assists and 5.2 rebounds. He didn't win Finals MVP, but he led the Warriors past the Cavaliers 4–2—and sparked the Dubs' dynasty run.

2017

After an epic loss in the 2016 Finals to LeBron's Cavs, Curry & Co. (hello, Kevin Durant!) got revenge against Cleveland with a gentleman's sweep the following June.

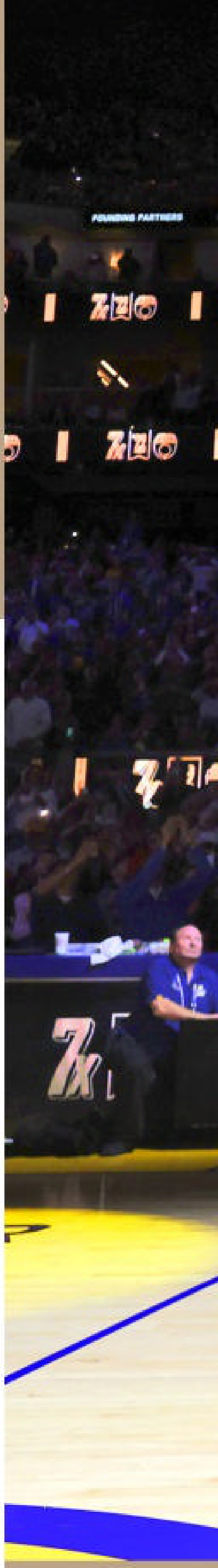
2018

Golden State made it two titles in a row by dominating the Cavs (again), finishing them in four games this time. Curry scored 37 points and made seven three-pointers in the clincher.



2022

Curry scorched the Celtics' top-ranked defense in his best Finals performance (31.2 ppg on 43.7% shooting from three), earning his first Finals MVP award and his fourth ring.



FROM TOP: JOHN W. MCDONOUGH; GREG NELSON (3)

GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS
2021-2022
NBA
CHAMPIONS

EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES

have the respect of people around you—like, all that stuff matters in the big picture. And it's hard to do."

The only people Curry wears out are the ones defending him. Everyone else, he boosts. There are a lot of highly driven people in pro sports, and plenty of sweethearts, but who else besides Curry is both all the time? He says the losses in the 2016 and '19 Finals sit with him more than the wins: "I still can put myself in those moments or feel that sense of emptiness. I feel that more now, looking back, versus the other ones for sure. That's the age-old conversation, right? Like, I think Jordan has articulated that. Kobe as well. For me, they go hand in hand." Still, his friends say his demeanor is the same after wins as after losses. Curry hears the criticism but says, "I don't carry it home."

Bob Myers, the Warriors' general manager since 2012, says he has seen him down once—in the '19–20 season, when Curry had hand surgery, Thompson had a torn ACL and the Warriors had no immediate hope.

GLORY GAZE *Curry called his fourth NBA championship his "greatest moment."*

S O
T Y
Sportsperson of the Year
WINTER 2022

Many people who know him call him the best person they know, and yet, because so much of Curry's character is tied to not acting special, they are hesitant to make too much of a fuss about it. Jason Richards, who was two years ahead of Curry at Davidson, tells anybody who asks that Curry is a better person than a player, but casually refers to him as "the kid."

Ayesha says, "I don't know that I've ever seen him angry. He's not argumentative. He never gets to that point. He's always able to take a step back outside of himself and look at multiple sides. . . . As a human being, it's a beautiful thing to watch, but as his wife, it's kind of annoying." She laughs. "It's like, 'O.K., Mr. Optimist!' "

This Curry self-assessment won't go viral like his post-Finals comment, but it sums him up as well as anything: "I don't need anybody to tell me I'm great or anything like that. I have a very high sense of self-confidence and what I can do. But there's also the self-awareness, too: You're not doing anything great in this world alone."

He is so comfortable with himself that he doesn't waste time on his ego. McKillop says, "If you text him or call him to say, 'Great game, great this, great that,' he won't respond. If you say, 'I hope you treat Ayesha like a queen today. Happy anniversary,' he'll get back to you." Richards, who is Underrated's director of athletic operations, says when his friends meet Curry for the first time, he gives them a warning: "Just so you know, he is going to make eye contact with you whenever you speak." When Curry talks to his high school coach, Shonn Brown, he is more likely to ask about Brown's team than mention his own. As a rookie, Curry walked down Bay Area streets quietly handing out $100 bills.

When you talk to him, he doesn't fiddle with his phone. Curry asks just about everyone he meets: "How are you?" He listens to the answer.

EAT.
LEARN
PLAY.

HOWARD
GOLF

ASSIST LEADER
Curry's habit of lifting others up extends beyond his teammates—to his foundation as well as golfers at Howard and on his Underrated tour.

FROM LEFT: YALONDA M. JAMES/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/AP; MICHEAL SCHOLIS

Kerr, who won three championships with Jordan's Bulls, says Curry cares deeply about giving fans the best Steph Curry he can muster: "They feel responsible. Jordan used to feel the same way. He felt responsible for putting on a show in front of the fans in Milwaukee who are only going to see him once or twice, whatever it was." Curry tries to carry this over to every interaction with the public. He told Carter, his longtime friend, he has a simple aspiration: He wants to make sure anybody who talks to him "has a good experience."

Myers has won four NBA titles with the Warriors, but he says working with Curry "will be probably the biggest blessing of my professional career. Not the winning. I mean, the winning is great. But the man, the person. . . . I really marvel at him, because a lot of his attributes, I cannot identify with. I don't have that ability to see happiness all around."

■

HERE IS A story you could tell about almost nobody else. When Curry played high school ball at Charlotte Christian, he and his fellow captain felt the team should bench a returning starter. Brown, their coach, agreed, and told the captains they had to deliver the news. Curry was not eager to do it, but being captain is not an à la carte job: You can't just pick and choose the tasks you enjoy. So Curry did it.

The other player was so angry that, on the court before practice one day, he went after Curry. There was Steph, on the ground, in a headlock, his face reddening. Curry did not fight back. He waited for the kid to release him, and, when he did, Curry got up and . . . said a few quiet words to him. Then he went back to practice shooting.

What is that? How many of us could summon that kind of empathy for somebody who is physically attacking us, in the moment of the attack? That was Curry as a *teenager.*

"He's got an emotional stability that sort of overrides the day-to-day emotion of the team," Kerr says. "He's our foundation. He allows us to get through everything—and we've been through a lot. Without him, this would have unraveled years ago."

In 2016, when the Warriors wanted to sign Kevin Durant, Curry helped recruit him, unconcerned about whether Golden State would be his team or Durant's. They won two titles together

“WINNING IS GREAT. BUT THE MAN, THE PERSON… I REALLY MARVEL AT HIM,” SAYS MYERS. “I DON’T HAVE THAT ABILITY TO SEE HAPPINESS ALL AROUND.”

SALGU WISSMATH/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/AP

and nearly won a third, with the public dissecting their relationship every day until Durant left for Brooklyn.

Once he got healthy, Curry returned to All-NBA form and his standing in history. Last December he broke the NBA’s career three-point record. In the past, he might have downplayed it and moved on; Ayesha says, “There was a period of time where you’d be like, ‘Do you realize what just happened? You just won a championship. You should probably take a moment to celebrate.’ ” But this time, he celebrated with a gathering of around 75 people at Catch Steak in New York City.

Steph sat between his dad and his college coach, and he was the only one who gave a speech—so he could thank everybody who had helped him. Alabama quarterback Bryce Young, who had just picked up his Heisman, was there. Kerr wasn’t sure whether he was invited, didn’t ask, didn’t go and didn’t worry about it. He knew Curry doesn’t keep score in his social life. But one person who did show up was Durant. For all the public dissection of their relationship and what it meant for their legacies, they remain on great terms. Curry had given Durant a good experience.

Even a championship NBA season is full of headaches, and Curry provides the Tylenol. When Draymond Green coldcocked Jordan Poole in October, Curry tried to play peacemaker—by listening more than lecturing. Ayesha says, “I think that was one of the first times I’ve seen something shake him because he cares.” When the season began, Curry was his usual All-NBA self, but the Warriors struggled. It will fall to him, once again, to mend and elevate. He says: “*Empathy* is a great word that you try to embody through the good times and hard times. It comes from a place where there’s no judgment, based on who you are, where you come from, what you bring to the table.”

■

THIS IS WHAT Steph Curry did *not* do this year: He did not make a big deal about now having twice as many titles as Durant. He did not publicly state his case as one of the top two players of this era, alongside James. He did not point out that he easily could have been—and arguably should have been—the 2015 Finals MVP ahead of Andre Iguodala. (Durant won the trophy in Golden State’s other two title runs.) He did not complain that Green’s preseason punch put him in an unfair position. He did not push the Warriors to trade one of their young potential stars for veterans who could help him win another title. Every year, as the trade deadline approaches, Myers asks Curry what he thinks, and he says Curry will “laugh and say, ‘You’re better at this than I am. So just whatever you think.’ Which is kind of crazy, right? He could abuse that power and he would get away with it. He never does.”

This summer, when Green said on his podcast that Curry “got double-teamed probably seven times the amount that KD did in a given series” when they were together, Durant fired back on Twitter: “From my view of it, this is 100% false.” But Curry did not enter the fray. He didn’t do any of that because he doesn’t need to. Genuine confidence does not require outside affirmation.

“We don’t win those championships unless I’m playing at the highest level,” he says of not winning Finals MVP before. “But also: Andre, KD, they deserved the award because of how they played.”

In a world that rewards relentless self-promotion, Curry is a confusing case, because he says and does things on the court that he would never do off it. He talks trash. He revels in his success—turning to face an opposing bench before his three-pointer tickles the net, doing his (relatively new) “night-night” celebration after sealing a win. He is so much fun to watch, in part, because he has so much fun being watched. But then he walks off the court and quickly starts deferring to everybody else. He does not play basketball to prove a point. The fun is the point.

“The pure joy I have on the court, it’s like a spacey kind of attitude. . . . Like, I’m not thinking of anything other than just hooping and having fun,” he says. “That’s why I have all these mannerisms and joy and happiness out there, because I’m kind of just lost in the game.”

That kind of balance is why the Warriors keep rolling in an era when nobody keeps rolling for long. Kerr says, “There’s lots of players around where you’re constantly having to think about their needs. We don’t have to spend any energy on that, because he’s so self-assured and so happy and confident in himself, in his own skin.”

Kerr once forgot to mention Curry when speaking at a championship parade. No big deal. During the Durant years, a radio host asked Kerr whether Durant or Curry was the better player, and he chose Durant. More interesting than Kerr’s opinion was that he shared it publicly: “I knew saying that, that Steph wouldn’t mind. Part of his power is his humility, his awareness of the team dynamics and who needs to hear what.”

But about that answer, Steve . . .

“KD, to me, remains even now the most talented player in the league,” Kerr says.

“His frame, his size—6' 11"—his ability to protect the rim defensively and then get any shot he wants offensively.

“But Steph was more impactful to our team because of the pace and because of the frenetic flow of his game, and how everybody chased him everywhere and how much it opened up. We’ve always struggled without Steph, where we’ve been able to win a lot of games without other key guys, including Kevin. So to me, it’s two different questions.”

Kerr did not fully appreciate Curry’s gifts until late in their first season together, 2014–15, which ended in a championship. Curry makes so many plays from so many places, and commands so much attention from opposing teams, that he frees the court for everybody else.

PRIZED PUPIL
Curry led the nation in scoring as a junior, his final season at Davidson.

JOHN BIEVER

■

KERR WAS JUST one in a long line of people to underestimate Curry. At 6' 2", Curry is five inches taller than the average American man, but he looks small on an NBA court. No matter how much facial hair he grows, he looks young. No major-conference school recruited him, general managers holding the first six picks in the 2009 draft passed on him and he perpetually seems like he is starring in a sports-fantasy movie in which the littlest kid is granted a wish to be better than everybody else, smiting giants by slingshotting basketballs through the net from 30 feet away, then grinning like he won a toy at the state fair. The average person cannot imagine being Giannis Antetokounmpo, but Curry is relatable. It all disguises what Kerr says is the truth about Curry: "He's one of the great athletes in the world."

Kerr sometimes brings footballs to practice, just to keep the team loose, and he describes Curry's throwing arm as "an absolute cannon." McKillop saw Curry play baseball when he was in middle school and says, "I swore he was the next Alex Rodriguez or Derek Jeter. I swear he could have been in the major leagues. I swear to God." When Curry took batting practice with the A's a few years ago, he hit a home run; when he pitched BP and somebody hit an infield pop-up, Curry jogged over and casually caught it bare-handed behind his back.

Once, Kerr surprised the team while on a road trip in Minnesota by canceling practice and taking the team bowling. Warriors assistant coach Bruce Fraser says Curry started out "strike, strike, strike"—all of them starting by the gutter and spinning back toward the center of the lane, PBA Tour–style. "I'm looking at this guy: 'That's not fair,' " Fraser says. Curry's team won, of course.

WONDER GRAD *While chasing a fourth ring, Curry earned his degree in sociology.*

CHRISTOPHER RECORD/DAVIDSON COLLEGE

When DeMarcus Cousins joined the Warriors in 2018, he watched Curry sink a pair of flip shots—way up high in the air, then right down through the net—and looked at Curry like he had won the lottery two weeks in a row. Fraser explained to Cousins: "That's not lucky."

"When you look at the world through your own lens, as everyone does, you can't fathom what that kind of hand-eye is," Fraser says. "You just cannot. It's almost like an eagle that sees a mile. That little thing, that far away . . . like, you can't even imagine what that is. This guy has that."

Curry's hand-eye coordination is especially apparent in golf, a sport he doesn't play nearly as often as he would like. Everybody knows Steph loves golf, but you might not realize how much: A few years ago when he landed awkwardly on his right foot in garbage time of a regular-season game, his first thought was that he would miss his tee time the next day. Curry is a plus-one handicap, meaning he is expected to break par; he bemoans a pair of recent 77s that damaged his handicap, which means 99% of golfers reading this sentence now resent him.

This summer, in the first round of the American Century Championship celebrity tournament in Tahoe, Curry holed out from 97 yards on the 13th hole. The next day, he got to 13 and hit his drive in the fairway again. As he walked to his ball, his playing partners, Justin Timberlake and Aaron Rodgers, were talking about how loud the roar was when Curry made eagle the day before. Curry promptly hit his approach to within a foot of the cup.

"I think the traditional opinion is [that] a guy who runs the fastest and jumps the highest is the best athlete," Kerr says. "I think that is one form of athleticism, but the other one that I think is at least equally as important—in basketball, more important—is hand-eye coordination, balance, focus, intensity."

The myth of Curry as an ordinary athlete is self-perpetuating. Every time somebody underestimates him because of his appearance, it becomes easier to see him as one of us. It helps that he acts like one of us, too. When he left Davidson, he promised he would graduate, a vow he took more seriously than anybody realized. After his rookie year, he went back to Davidson all dressed up to watch his classmates get their degrees. The school had a rule that limited remote learning, so Curry couldn't finish his degree while playing full NBA seasons, but during the 2011 lockout, he went back to campus and took classes.

When Davidson loosened remote-learning rules in the pandemic, Curry decided this was the year he would graduate, and there he was last spring, waking at 6:30 a.m. Pacific Time to Zoom with professors and having tutors visit him at home. Ayesha says they would FaceTime during Warriors road trips, and Steph was working on his thesis. He was like a college kid playing in the NCAA tournament—studying, traveling and trying to win a championship. All along, he could have received an honorary

WARRIORS
GATORADE
NBA WARRIORS FINALS
BOSTON
0
WIGGINS
22
THOMPSON
11

DEEP IMPACT
Curry capped a season in which he broke Ray Allen's record for career threes by hitting 31 against Boston in the NBA Finals.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

degree, but he had no interest. McKillop used to tell his players, "Finish everything," and Curry was listening. Basketball's most exceptional shooter wanted no exceptions.

> "I THINK HE PUTS HIS HEAD ON THE PILLOW EVERY NIGHT AND GOES, 'MAN, WHAT A GREAT DAY,' " KERR SAYS. "HE'S LIVING SUCH A FULL LIFE."

◆

IN THE EARLY days of the NBA, stars were just players, and then they were celebrities, and then they became pitchmen. Today's stars are conglomerates. In September, Curry assembled all of his people in Las Vegas for a retreat, and when he got there, he looked out at them and thought, *Holy s---*.

There were more than 50 employees there, working for various entities: SC30, his branding company; Unanimous Media; Underrated, his events company; and the Eat.Learn.Play. Foundation. That didn't even count people who work for Ayesha's company, AC Brands.

Many stars of this caliber, surrounded by so many others who are beholden to them, live in diamond-encrusted echo chambers. Myers says, "A lot of people in that type of stratosphere of fame lose the ability to even ask questions of other people." When Curry's employees all went to Topgolf in Vegas, he spent most of his time there teaching the game.

Curry got some publicity for helping fund the golf teams at Howard, but its director of golf, Sam Puryear, says, "It's not about [credit for] the money with him. He has a vested interest in these young people. If I'm being honest with you, if it were up to him, he wouldn't get any of the headlines. He's that kind of guy."

Curry texts with Puryear regularly. Sometimes he FaceTimes with Howard teams after events. When Howard played at Stanford in March, Curry—out of the Warriors' lineup because of an injured foot—came to watch and to give the Curry touch. He spoke to the team, of course, but Puryear says, "It's not so much what he said. He spent time with them."

This summer Curry returned from a France vacation with Ayesha and arrived at the Olympic Hotel for his basketball camp the next morning. Brown, his high school coach, wondered whether Curry was tired from jet lag. Curry said, "Coach, it's camp time. We're ready to go." He went to every session of the three-day camp, which is coed at his insistence and includes a financial literacy class. He let the kids watch him work out, so they could see what it takes to play in the NBA.

The Currys have also spearheaded the rebuilding of playgrounds in the Oakland Unified School District. John Sasaki, the district's communications director, says the Currys are "a driving factor in transforming so much of our student experience." Steph's charity work, like his profession, brings him joy.

"I think he puts his head on the pillow every night and goes, 'Man, what a great day,' " Kerr says. "He's living such a full life." Indeed, Steph is the kind of elite sleeper who leaves a spouse in awe: "I wish I could sleep half as well as he does," Ayesha says. "His REM score is probably off the charts."

McKillop teases Curry about running for office someday, but Ayesha says she can't imagine that, "because I know that he doesn't want to." With his not-about-me manner and perpetual need to see the best in those who disagree with him, Curry is not a politician. He is what people want politicians to be. His charity work is mostly an attempt to give people the same kind of life that he enjoys. Eat well. Be financially secure. Play golf. Vote. Make your shots. Finish everything. Ayesha says, "Growing up and experiencing these things, he wants to share it with the community."

This is what Steph Curry did this year: He moved forward in his game's pantheon, went backward to get his degree and somehow stayed the same. He loved being on stage but also enjoyed walking off it. He gave people a good experience. Four championships, one Finals MVP, the all-time record for three-pointers, a burgeoning business empire, SI's Sportsperson of the Year, and we know what Steph Curry is gonna say now:

How are you? ◻

S O
T Y

WON FOR ALL
Curry had a big year. He hopes you enjoyed the experience, too.

KOHJIRO KINNO

HOLE NEW

Carter Bonas calls his autism his superpower, and he's leaned into it as he's become a competitive golfer, a businessman—and the 2022 SportsKid of the Year

BY MARK BECHTEL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFFERY A. SALTER

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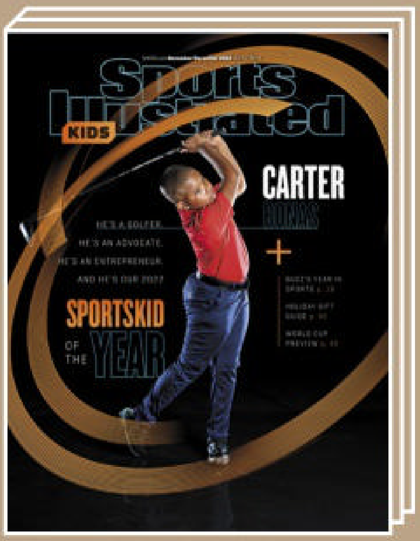

Sports Illustrated
KIDS
CARTER BONAS
HE'S A GOLFER. HE'S AN ADVOCATE. HE'S AN ENTREPRENEUR. AND HE'S OUR 2022
SPORTSKID OF THE YEAR

THREE YEARS AGO, Carter Bonas was being bullied so badly at school he told his principal he didn't want to go on living. Carter, who was then 8, has autism and was struggling to fit in. He didn't speak until he was 4, and as he got older he often coped with uncomfortable situations by giving hugs, which opened him up to teasing from his classmates and confused some of his teachers. Tantrums were frequent, and he had a hard time finding a school where he could learn.

Fast forward to today. Carter is a competitive golfer who is pals with Ernie Els. He's a motivational speaker, delivering talks to students and grown-ups alike. He's a business owner, selling his own line of golf apparel. And he's done it all by leaning into the condition that seemed to make life so challenging in the first place. As his Instagram bio declares, *Autism is my superpower.*

"He's learning to channel those obsessions into his business, into his golf, where it's becoming a positive thing," says Carter's mom, Thelma Tennie. "Most kids might give up, but he does not have that ability to give up on something. He has to get it done, or he's not gonna be O.K."

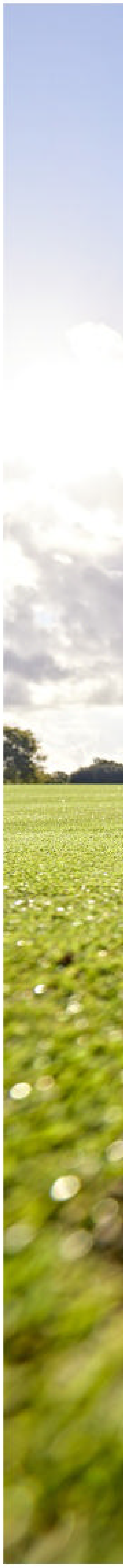
As Carter grew up, Thelma and her husband, Eddie Tennie, tried to find an activity that would allow him to meet other kids. "I tried most sports, but I didn't really like them," he says. "Some of them there was running around, people pushing you, coaches yelling at you." Eventually a friend of his mom's suggested golf. "I like golf because I don't like being touched," Carter says. "It's relaxing. And I love nature, too."

The family lives in Florida, adjacent to the Country Club of Coral Springs, so Carter began taking lessons with Corey Henry, the pro at the club. Carter wasn't exactly Rory McIlroy when he started. "Oh, he was terrible," Henry says with a laugh. But the two worked and worked, for 12 or 13 hours a week, figuring out not just golf but how the teaching process would go with Carter. "We bonded," says Henry. "Now we have our own rhythm. I know how he learns, and he knows how I teach."

Now, Carter hits the ball about 215 yards off the tee. Henry estimates he's played in 15 tournaments and finished in the top four or five in at least half of them. "The sky's the limit for him," says Henry. "He has the physical and the mental ability."

Carter doesn't just play well; he looks good doing it. When he was 10 he started his own apparel line, Spectrum Golf. "I started my business because I was worried nobody would employ me in the future because I have autism and I had a hard time making friends," Carter explains. "So I feared that when my mom and dad weren't around anymore, it would be really hard for me to find a job or just make a living. So I wanted to start my own business, so I would never have to worry about that."

Golf gear wasn't his first idea. "He wanted to sell the vegetables in his garden," says Thelma.



SPORTSKID *of the* **YEAR**

WORLD

"After he sat down, did the math and realized how much money he needs to support himself as an adult, he realized our backyard was not big enough to grow enough produce." He also thought about selling rocks from the front yard.

Finally inspiration struck, and Carter hit upon something that people might actually want to buy. He spends a lot of time in the hot sun, and because of his autism he's very sensitive about how things feel against his skin. "We were spending lots of money on clothes that were supposed to be comfortable for me, but they weren't, because I have a skin sensitivity," he says.

So he and his parents ordered sample after sample online and eventually found fabrics that worked. He came up with the name Spectrum Golf and a logo, an S and a backward G. "I was writing the SG, but I wrote the G backwards because I'm dyslexic," he says. "My mom said to fix it, but my dad said it'll look good. And it did."

Carter isn't the only one repping the brand. He met Anita Uwadia, who plays on the LPGA's Epson Tour, and after chatting with her became her sponsor. He also had the chance to meet Els, the former U.S. Open winner, who has an autistic son. Els and Carter spent time together when Els was at a tournament in Florida last February. Els gave Carter some pointers, and Carter gave Els some swag. Els also invited the family to visit his Els Center of Excellence, a facility for autistic people, and the two recently played a round together at Els's course in Egypt when Carter's family was on vacation. "What Carter's done, starting up his own company and carving out a place for himself in society, that's what we're trying to achieve with the kids at our center," says Els. "Carter's story is an inspiration to other kids on the spectrum, so it was wonderful to have him there."

The kid who didn't speak until he was 4 is not shy about sharing that story. "I am amazed and shocked by him every time he gets onstage or in front of students," Thelma says. "He lights up; he loves sharing how he overcame his struggles and how he works every day to overcome them."

It's an ongoing process. It's still hard for Carter to make friends with kids his own age. He has a tough time sharing his toys because he can't help but worry something will get broken. "For him, *let's play* means you sit in the room with me, you play with your stuff, I play with my stuff," says his mom. "But he's getting better."

And that's at the heart of the message he delivers when he talks to crowds. "You can do anything," Carter says. "You just have to believe in yourself and always stay positive." ☐

ALLYSON FELIX LEFT THE TRACK WORLD BETTER THAN SHE FOUND IT, AND SHE'S NOT DONE YET

BY MAGGIE MERTENS

PHOTOGRAPH BY
KOHJIRO KINNO

HAIR BY
ALEXANDER ARMAND

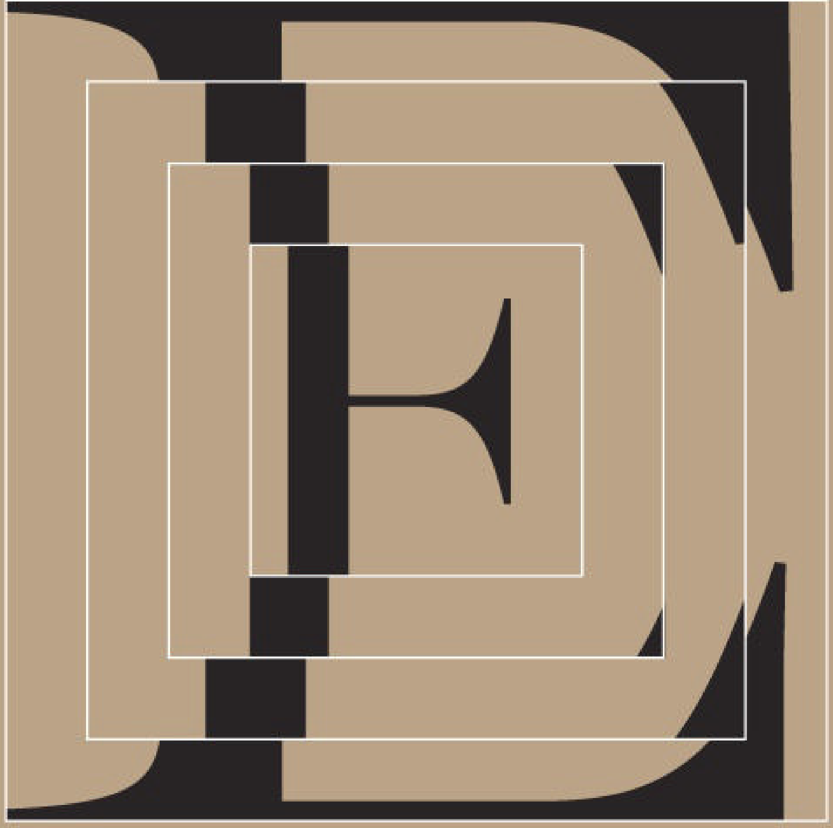
MAKEUP BY
AUTUMN MOULTRIE
AT THE WALL GROUP

STYLING BY
APRIL JACKSON

2022

the
MUHAMMAD ALI

LEGACY AWARD



EVERYTHING CHANGED for Allyson Felix when a potentially deadly diagnosis for her and her infant daughter led the baby to the NICU. It was November 2018, and Camryn had been born two months early, via emergency C-section, at just three pounds, eight ounces.

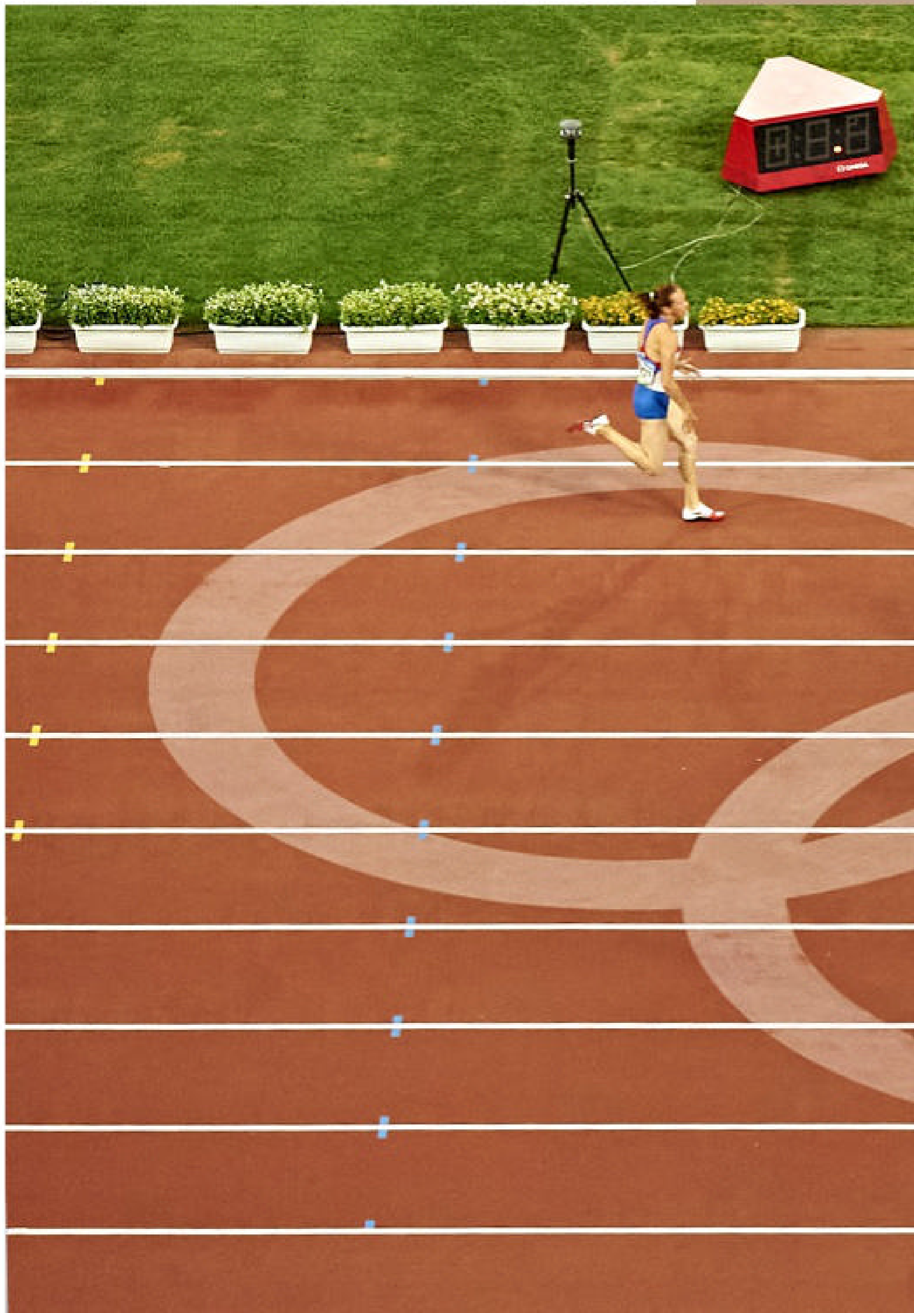
"For the first time in my entire life, track was on the back burner," Felix says. "I wasn't concerned about running my next race. I was concerned about my daughter living and for us to be able to be together as a family."

While they both survived that frightening time, Felix would never be the same. The course she'd chart from that moment would transform the track star—known for always keeping her gaze focused on the lane ahead—into an activist and path-breaking entrepreneur.

Until then, Felix had preferred to let her performance on the track speak for itself. Speed that built with a hum. Legs and arms that pumped with smooth fluidity. Explosions of acceleration that quieted her competition. Then a flash of a bright smile, a wave to her adoring fans.

It had been like that since she showed up to track tryouts as a 15-year-old, basketball-loving freshman at Los Angeles Baptist High and astounded coaches with her raw speed. She was a rare breed of athlete—one that not only lived up to the early hype, but also far exceeded expectations. She won her first Olympic medal, a silver in the 200 meters, at the 2004 Games in Athens at just 18 years old. Her total career haul after retiring at 36 in July '22: a women's track and field record 11 Olympic medals (seven gold) at five consecutive Games; 10 national titles, in three different events; and 20 World Athletic Championship medals (14 gold), making her the most decorated athlete in the event's history.

In truth, though, change had started to stir in Felix in the months before Camryn's birth. At six months pregnant in 2018, she trained in the darkness of dawn so no one could see her growing baby bump. She didn't want Nike, her sponsor since '10, to find out that she was expecting. Felix's contract had ended in December '17, just before her pregnancy, and she wanted to use her renegotiation to ensure she could start a family without losing her livelihood. When she asked Nike for a guaranteed protection of her salary around the months surrounding childbirth, should she have a baby, she says Nike declined. While still in negotiations, Felix got pregnant. She concealed as much as she could, for as long as she could, but then, at a routine doctor's appointment, Felix was diagnosed with severe preeclampsia, high blood pressure that



BILL FRAKES

can be fatal in pregnancy. Camryn remained in the NICU for about a month before Felix and her husband, Kenneth Ferguson, took her home.

When Nike finally proposed a contract in which the company agreed to protect her salary for 12 months after giving birth, she says she told them she'd accept only if the terms were tied to maternity, setting a precedent for all female athletes the company sponsored. Nike declined. So while she recovered from a traumatic birth to get back to race form as soon as possible, she still didn't have a contract.

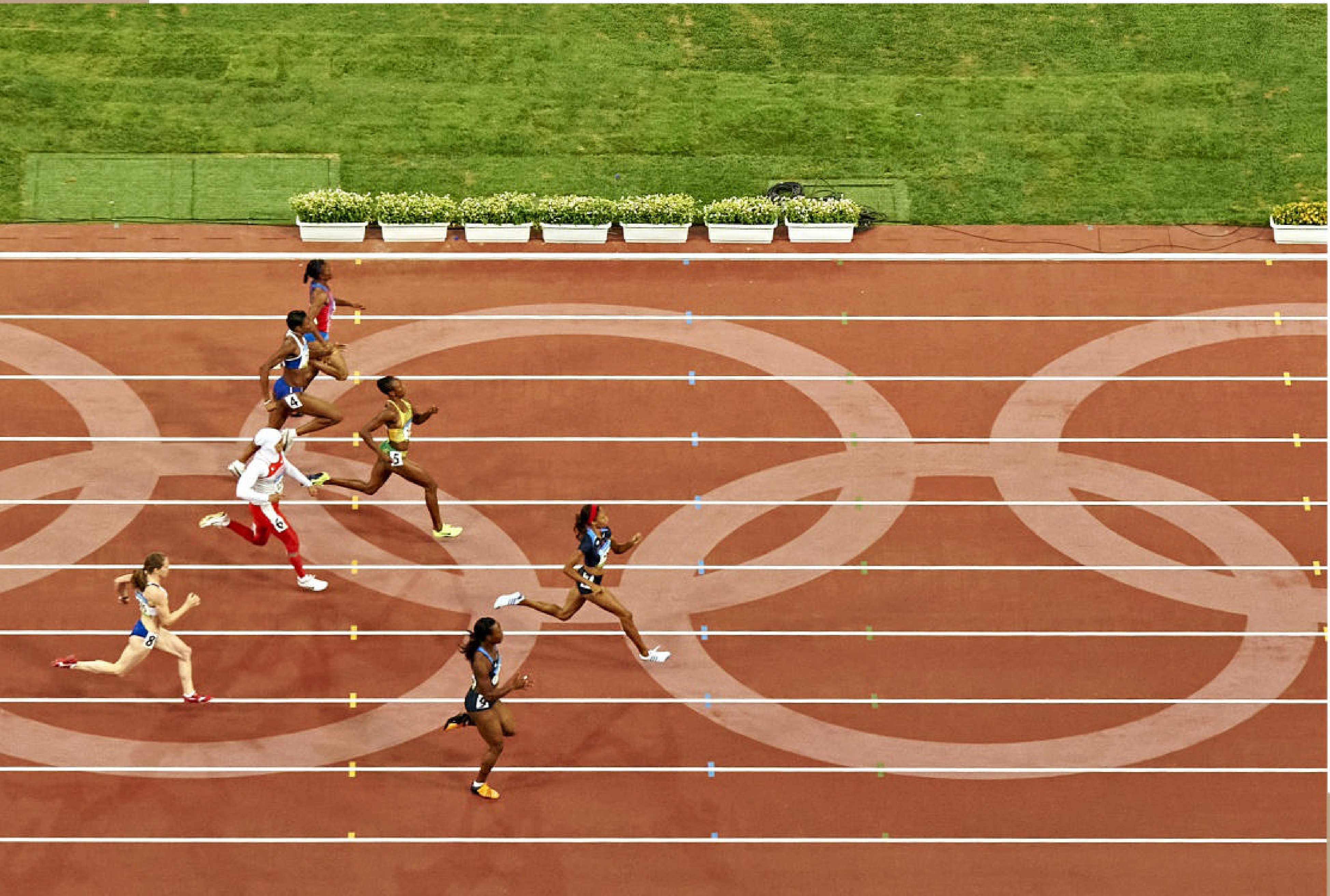
The whole experience was lonely—but a few months later, something happened that made her realize she wasn't alone at all. In May 2019, a viral *New York Times* investigation revealed how Alysia Montaño, an Olympian in the 800 meters, had left Nike in '13 because the company told her that if she got pregnant, it would pause her contract until she could race again. Her next sponsor, Asics, also threatened to stop paying her after she had her daughter in '14. Kara Goucher, another Olympian, told the *Times* that Nike had stopped paying her when her son was born in '10, until she began competing again. When her son was hospitalized with an illness at three months old, she had no choice but to return to training and leave him, to earn her paycheck to support her family.

These stories confirmed Felix's feeling that something was wrong in her sport on a bigger scale. "I felt a strong pull that I needed to be involved as an athlete who was going through a really difficult time, in real time," she says.

On top of that, her agent had recently told her that Nike wanted her to be in a campaign for the upcoming 2019 Women's World Cup. Promoting a company's message of women's empowerment while being told by the same company that athletes who became mothers weren't due any financial protections? That felt dishonest to Felix. Still, it wasn't easy for the formerly quiet athlete to speak up.

"It was so outside of my comfort zone. I'm a person who is shy by nature and I don't like to rock the boat. So it was really, really difficult to be able to find that place to come forward and to share what had been going on," she says. Ten days after Montaño's op-ed was released, Felix penned her own story in *The New York Times*.

And because she was Allyson Felix—a marquee name who had never spoken out on anything controversial before, who had just shown up, done the work and added to her medal collection for nearly two decades—the whole world paid attention.



GILDED ERA
Felix's illustrious Olympic career spanned 17 years and five straight Games.

Goucher saw the public reaction shift. “When Alysia did her video, and I shared my story, it got people talking, but the response was [half] support,” says Goucher. “But when Allyson came out, the impact was immediate.”

Her story went viral. Media coverage of the issue exploded. A congressional inquiry was launched into Nike’s practices. And within months, Nike announced a new maternity policy that guaranteed 18 months of pay for sponsored athletes who have children. Other athletic apparel companies have since followed suit. “There’s just no way that maternity contracts could have changed the way they did without her influence. Her voice was so powerful,” Goucher says.

Montaño was surprised when she read about Felix’s contract struggles. She’d assumed Felix, with all her medals and marketing potential, would “have all the support in the world.” When Montaño came forward, she had no sponsor and hadn’t run competitively in two years. “I shared because I had nothing to lose,” she says.

Meanwhile, as a long-distinguished athlete still competing at the highest level, Felix was jeopardizing her career by speaking out. “She did have that reputation of no controversy, nothing negative,” Goucher says. “She did have a lot to lose. She risked [it] to do what was right.”

Since that moment, Felix hasn’t stopped using her voice, and her power, for other mother athletes—and mothers everywhere—to have better work protections, paid leave, improved health outcomes and access to affordable childcare. This tireless work and fearless advocacy are why she is this year’s SPORTS ILLUSTRATED Muhammad Ali Legacy Award winner.

◆

AFTER SHE WENT public, Felix didn’t sign another contract with Nike. Instead, she paved a new path entirely, becoming the first athlete to be sponsored by Athleta, the women-run sports apparel company owned by Gap Inc. (Simone Biles would follow.) By July 2019, just eight months after Camryn’s birth, Felix had returned to competition, earning her 12th and 13th world championship gold medals in the lead-up to the U.S. Olympic track and field trials for the Tokyo Games. But she was still without a footwear sponsor. So she and her brother, Wes Felix, recruited Natalie Candrian, a former Nike and Adidas designer, to create running spikes for Felix less than a year before the Games. The super light, 3.9-ounce baby-blue spikes were assembled in Portland; she trained in samples. They officially announced the formation of Saysh, a footwear and lifestyle company, in June ’21. The name is a take on seiche waves, the type of standing swells that can form in an enclosed body of water, like a lake—exactly the ripples Felix is hoping to make in the sports world.

“[Saysh] exists because I believe that women deserve better,” Felix says. As she dove into the details of manufacturing, Felix was astounded to find out that most athletic sneakers are made based on the mold of a man’s foot, whether they’re marketed as men’s or women’s. The Saysh One, the company’s first lifestyle sneaker, was specifically designed to fit a woman’s foot and launched in September 2021. Saysh’s first running and training shoes are expected in ’23. Felix sees Saysh as a way to start changing

MOM MOVES
With her daughter by her side, Felix has redefined motherhood in sports.

HANNAH PETERS/GETTY IMAGES FOR WORLD ATHLETICS

In It for the Long Haul

FROM HER TEENS TO TODAY, FELIX CONTINUES TO MAKE WAVES

2001

At 15, the Los Angeles Baptist High School sophomore was featured in FACES IN THE CROWD *(SI, Aug. 13, 2001)* after winning gold in the 100 meters at the World Youth Championships.

2005

Two years after forgoing her college eligibility to sign a pro contract with Adidas, Felix, 19, became the youngest 200-meter winner at the World Championships in Helsinki, Finland.

2012

She won two silvers in the 200 meters and a team gold in the 4 × 400-meter relay at the '04 and '08 Games, but Felix had to wait until London in '12 to nab her first individual gold, in the 200.

2021

After surpassing Carl Lewis as the U.S.'s most decorated track and field athlete, Felix joined Vice President Kamala Harris for the White House Maternal Health Day of Action in December.

FROM TOP: STEVE YEATER; BOB MARTIN; SIMON BRUTY; MANUEL BALCE CENETA/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

the status quo throughout the sports apparel industry; in April the company launched a groundbreaking return policy, allowing women to exchange sizes if their feet change during pregnancy. But Felix is also thinking bigger. "Even beyond the shoes, we need companies that see women, and that starts from within," she says. "It starts with the culture and all of our team being aligned around that cause—that women should not be overlooked and that we're gonna do better by them."

In Tokyo in 2021, at age 35, Felix earned her final two Olympic medals: a bronze in the 400 meters and a gold in the 4 × 400-meter relay, both with Saysh spikes on her feet. But Felix did much more than wear messages of empowerment at the Games: With the help of Athleta and the Women's Sports Foundation, she launched a program to give more than $200,000 in childcare grants to mom athletes traveling to competitions in 2021, including six other Tokyo Olympians and Paralympians.

Focusing on childcare was a natural next step for Felix. When she returned to running after her daughter was born, she realized not only how hard it was to compete with a baby in tow, but also how expensive it was. "I feel really blessed that I had the resources to travel the world and bring someone to help me," she says. "But I was thinking about the other families who weren't able to. I have a lot of friends who ended up having to shorten their careers."

After the Olympics, Felix joined the board of &Mother, the nonprofit Montaño cofounded to drive change for mothers in sports. Together, with Athleta, they built upon the grant program from the Olympics to offer free, on-site childcare at track and field events in 2022, including this summer's U.S. Outdoor Championships. Montaño says working with Felix and her supporters has meant a bigger impact—and faster change. "We wouldn't have had the ability to so quickly amplify our story if Allyson did not share hers in such a way," Montaño says. "She was willing to get her hands in there and use her network and partners to help us do the work."

Goucher says runners who are also mothers have been portrayed differently since Felix began her advocacy. "When I had my son, it was almost like I had to prove that I didn't have a kid. The message was: 'Don't be a mom when you're out running.' " Now, she says: "There's moms on the track with their babies, and it's looked at as a human enhancer, rather than an athletic disadvantage."

And women in other sports are feeling the shift, too. Since Felix spoke out, the WNBA and its players union have renegotiated their contract to include, for the first time, paid maternity leave and childcare expenses for players. And in historic contracts ratified this year, the U.S. women's national soccer team players secured not only equal pay, but also six months of paid parental leave, while the National Women's Soccer League players secured eight weeks. Athletes Unlimited, which runs women's pro softball, lacrosse, basketball and volleyball leagues, offers unlimited paid parental leave and childcare. These protections have likely helped encourage more women athletes to not put off having children until their careers are over. Meanwhile, stars like Alex Morgan, Crystal Dunn and Skylar Diggins-Smith are now proudly bearing the title Athlete Mother.

Marking progress is always heartening, but in today's divisive political environment, issues affecting women's health and maternity decisions can also seem more controversial than ever. In the face of broader setbacks—like proposed universal childcare and parental leave legislation failing to pass through Congress, and the Dobbs decision from the Supreme Court, striking down Roe v. Wade—Felix says she is not discouraged, but more motivated. "I think that just fires me up more. These are things that we have to get done, and we can't afford to go backwards," she says.

Felix says since the beginning of speaking up, she's done this work for—and with—her peers and those who came before her. "It makes me so excited when I see so many women having children, coming back to sport [and] being supported. That's what this has all been about."

■

IN AN EXTREMELY Allyson Felix example of selflessness, she ran her last competitive race (in a supporting role) eight days after she was *supposed* to have retired. After winning a bronze at the World Championships in July in the mixed gender 4 × 400-meter relay, she'd already headed back to Los Angeles and what she thought was retirement. But when coach Bobby Kersee suddenly needed a runner, she hopped on a plane back to Eugene, Ore., to hold down a leg of the preliminary women's 4 × 400-meter relay *(near right)*. After qualifying the team for the final, Felix looked on while four young track stars captured the gold medal for the U.S. Those four—20-year-old Talitha Diggs, 22-year-old Abby Steiner, 22-year-old Britton Wilson and 23-year-old Sydney McLaughlin—have Felix to thank for getting them into the final, yes, but also for creating a world where being a woman runner doesn't mean having to delay having a family, or hide a pregnancy, or fear for how to care for her kids while traveling for work.

With competitive racing behind her, Felix knows her athletic career is done doing its talking, but that doesn't mean she's done using her voice.

"I always think about my daughter and the world that she's gonna grow up in, and I would love for that to be a more equal world," Felix says. "I would love for her to not have any limitations or think about anything twice because she's a girl. So those are all things that continue to push me and to know that there's so much more to do." □

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"IT MAKES ME EXCITED WHEN I SEE SO MANY WOMEN HAVING CHILDREN, COMING BACK TO SPORT [AND] BEING SUPPORTED."

FROM LEFT: CARMEN MANDATO/GETTY IMAGES; KOHJIRO KINNO

SECOND ACT
Now retired, Felix has turned her full focus to fighting for maternal protections.

BAA-BYE TO THE GOATS

THE YEAR IN RETIREMENTS BEGAN WITH A BIT OF A FALSE ALARM. BUT EVEN WITHOUT TOM BRADY, THE 2022 CLASS OF RETIRED ATHLETES IS A PEERLESS GROUP

› ALBERT PUJOLS

NOTHING CAPTURES Pujols's talent like his nickname: The Machine. To earn that moniker, he was not just incredibly powerful but also incredibly consistent, a hitter who thrived on the border of what seemed reasonable for a human being. And that was Pujols—so good that it seemed he could hardly be real. He was Rookie of the Year, a three-time MVP, a six-time Silver Slugger and 11-time All-Star. Throughout the aughts, he was a batter who rarely had credible peers. Even the best machines wear out eventually, but in his final season, at age 42, Pujols managed one last thrill with a return to form. He hit 24 home runs in 2022, passing the milestone of 700 and finishing with a career total of 703. Now, in retirement, his legacy endures through his other nickname—one bestowed on him not by media or fans. Tío Albert, as fellow players call him, has been a source of mentorship and wisdom, leaving friends and protégés across the game. *—Emma Baccellieri*

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

LATE LASH

Pujols smashed two home runs against the Dodgers on Sept. 23 to get his career total to 700.

FIELD JESTER
Gronk was a paradigm shifter as a player—and as a refreshingly silly and lighthearted presence off the field.

JEFF HAYNES

SOTY

ROB GRONKOWSKI

GRONKOWSKI WAS the first modern Super Tight End, and he was a catalyst for the later years of New England's two-decades-long stretch of dominance. He was, essentially, a Pro Bowl left tackle and wide receiver all at once. Last we saw him in a football context, he was wrapping up an injury-plagued season with a playoff loss to the Rams. But perhaps it's better to remember him in a version of his natural habitat: booty-dropping on a boat after the Buccaneers won Super Bowl LV. He now seems content masterminding his brand, maintaining the illusion that he's a meathead, rather than a football savant. Today's NFL is full of tight ends like Mark Andrews, George Kittle and Travis Kelce—brutal blockers and A-plus pass catchers. That's the biggest compliment you could give Gronk: As he left the scene, everyone tried to find a knockoff.

—Conor Orr

SERENA WILLIAMS

WHEN SHE won the 1999 U.S. Open, her first major singles title, Williams was 17. When she retired (we think; it seems, uh, *fluid*) at the 2022 U.S. Open, she was 40 and in pursuit of her 24th major. For almost a quarter century, she won everywhere, in every imaginable context, against all manner of opposition. But facts and figures don't do justice to her impact on the sport, if not on all sports. She fired up something for the memory banks this year in New York when she beat the No. 2 player in the world (someone 15 years her junior). But her retirement also doubled as a career celebration. It was attended, yes, by celebrities (Tiger, Zendaya, Spike Lee), but also by fans of all ages and backgrounds. The next Serena? She is a literal once-in-a-lifetime athlete. Consider this: With Williams retired, the active WTA player with the most major singles titles has *only* seven. That would be Serena's older sister Venus.

—L. Jon Wertheim

SUPER SERVER *Williams was a supreme point-starter for the entirety of her 25-year career.*

BOB MARTIN

WINGED VICTORY
Federer was as revered for winning as he was for his effortless style.

ERICK W. RASCO

› ROGER FEDERER

MANY OF his records have already been surpassed. Does that make him, now, a folk hero? That wouldn't be quite right; Federer was far too popular, too present, to be defined by only myth. But it's hard not to think about his game in supernatural terms. He made David Foster Wallace dissolve into a puddle; he turned even the most staid writers purple. He was levitation and liquid and all those things. He was also just *good*. He won 20 majors, sure. But at his peak, he was sickeningly consistent: There were 25 majors played from 2004 to '10, and Federer played in 21 of those finals. He warded off Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic for as long as he could. But once they surpassed him, he did not wilt. He fought hard for a decade and was rewarded with a last spurt of majors in his late 30s. He's 41 now, with a bad right knee, so he played his last match, his only one of the '22 season, in doubles alongside Nadal. Fitting for an athlete who loved achieving, but who seemed to love *playing* even more. *—Chris Almeida*

NET GAINS *Krzyzewski's Duke teams made 13 trips to the Final Four, including this one in 2001, when his Blue Devils beat Arizona in the final.*

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

› MIKE KRZYZEWSKI

KRZYZEWSKI'S achievements can be described in so many ways, but for the moment, this will do: In the last of his 42 seasons at Duke, the year he turned 75, he won an ACC regular-season championship and made the Final Four—and those meager-by-his-standards accomplishments were used by rivals to mock him. Duke haters had to settle for small losses. Yes, Krzyzewski's Blue Devils were upset by North Carolina in his final home game, and then again in a national semifinal. But that season would have been the best in the last 40 years for, say, Purdue. Krzyzewski captured five national championships at a school that previously had none. He won more games than any men's coach ever. His replacement, Jon Scheyer, will try to uphold the standard. But no other active coach can be compared to Coach K.

—Michael Rosenberg

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› SYLVIA FOWLES

BOARD GAME
Nobody was as dominant a rebounder as Fowles over the last decade.

GOING INTO her final season, Fowles already had a rock-solid claim to the title of best center in WNBA history. But she added to her résumé by making the All-Defensive team for the 11th time in 15 years. She led the league in field goal percentage (62.2%) and rebounding average (9.8); bigger picture, she became the first player to surpass 4,000 career boards and by year's end was No. 3 all time in blocked shots (721). At 37, she walks away from the game with 193 career double doubles and holds career records for FG percentage (59.9%) and anything having to do with a rebound. She won two titles, and she also set an example of what a superstar can be: a mentor, an amateur cyclist and so much more—she's a passionate student of the mortuary sciences and may soon work as a mortician. She didn't lead the Lynx to the playoffs this year, but she showed the world that, even for the great ones, there's more to life than just the game. *—Greg Bishop*

DAVID SHERMAN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

S O
T Y

› SUE BIRD

JUST TRY fitting her accomplishments into a tight space. Bird, at 42, has won four WNBA championships, two NCAA championships and titles in both the EuroLeague and the Russian Superleague. She is the WNBA's all-time leader in assists (3,048), starts (549) and games played (580; no one else in league history has seen more than 500). There's much more, but, you know: *tight space*. Last season she led one final playoff run—the 15th of her storied career—while capturing the attention of a city long starved for big-time basketball. Bird's GOAT-ness is best summarized by something one of her coaches, Dan Hughes, said before her final Storm home game. When someone says "point guard," Hughes noted that he thinks first of Sue Bird. She's that elite. "Like quarterback/ Tom Brady." —G.B.

SUE'S STORM
No athlete has been synonymous with Seattle in the 21st century like Bird.

ROBERT BECK

› JIMMIE JOHNSON

NO ONE has won more NASCAR titles than Johnson. The other two men tied with him at seven wins are Richard Petty and Dale Earnhardt, a pair of Southern gents who dominated when it was possible to win a race by six or eight laps. Johnson, the 47-year-old Californian, won his championships at a time when technology and rules conspired to level the playing field—which is literally what Johnson did at the end of his career, when he traded the banks of Daytona for the flats of the Brickyard. His foray into open-wheel racing didn't yield much in the way of results, but it served to remind us who Johnson was: a guy who loves to drive all manner of vehicles fast. Stock cars. (He'll drive part time in NASCAR next year.) Indy cars. Motorcycles. Off-road desert racers. Above all, he showed that a kid from the West Coast could be beloved as he beat the Good Ol' Boys in a way we'll likely never see again.

—Mark Bechtel

CHAMPION
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Lowe's

SIMON BRUTY

GOOD STOCK
Johnson won seven NASCAR Cups—and he thrived in IndyCar and endurance races, too.

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Jimmie Johnson
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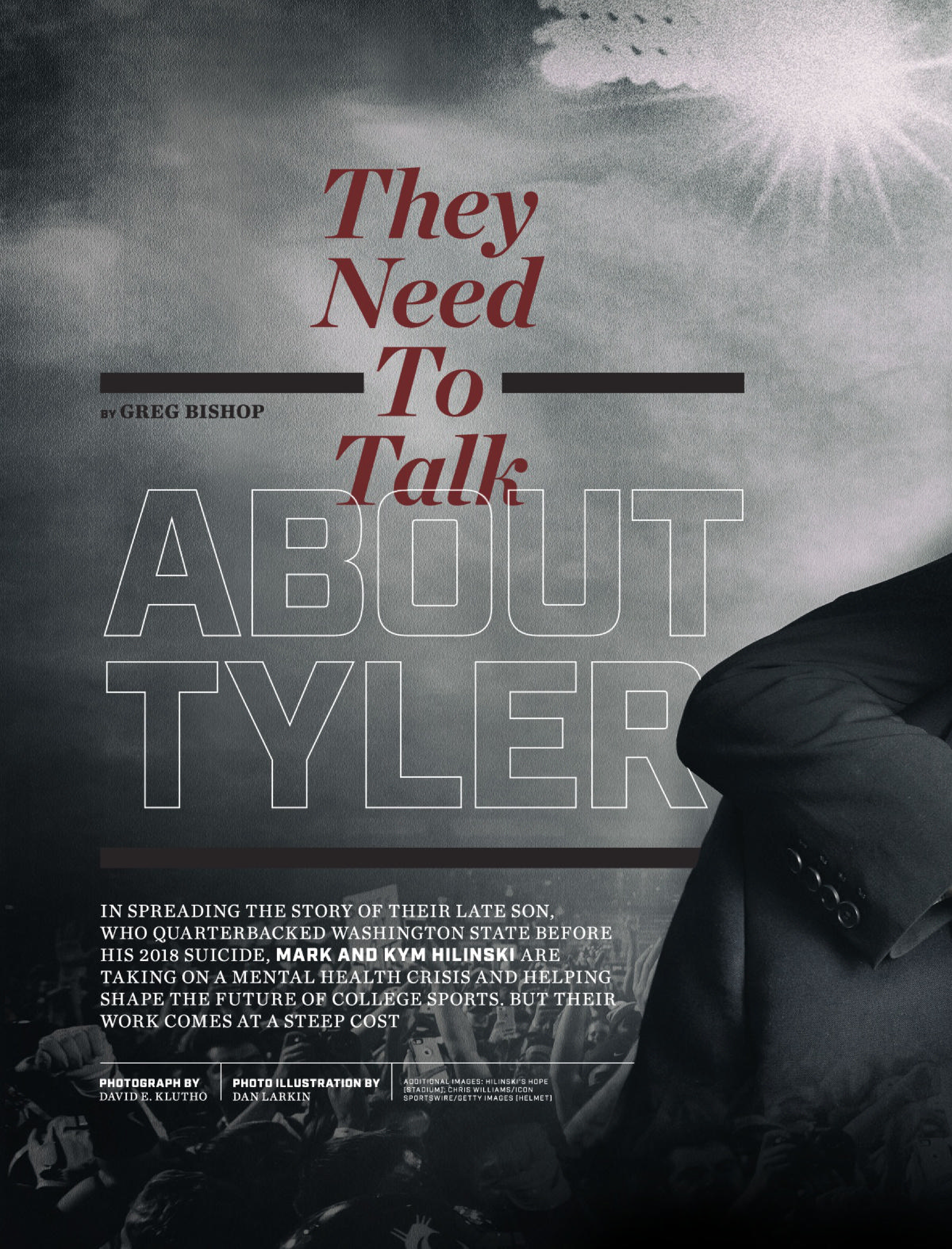


They Need To Talk ABOUT TYLER

BY **GREG BISHOP**

IN SPREADING THE STORY OF THEIR LATE SON, WHO QUARTERBACKED WASHINGTON STATE BEFORE HIS 2018 SUICIDE, **MARK AND KYM HILINSKI** ARE TAKING ON A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AND HELPING SHAPE THE FUTURE OF COLLEGE SPORTS. BUT THEIR WORK COMES AT A STEEP COST

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DAVID E. KLUTHO

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY
DAN LARKIN

ADDITIONAL IMAGES: HILINSKI'S HOPE [STADIUM]; CHRIS WILLIAMS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES [HELMET]

NEVER FORGET
SKI'S HOPE
HILINSKI

Four and a half years after their 21-year-old son took his own life,

Mark and Kym Hilinski stand before yet another audience of young athletes with whom they need to share their story, no matter how much it hurts to tell.

Among the 100-odd people seated in Utah State's auditorium-sized football meeting room is a head coach who earlier this year lost a son to suicide. And one player who attempted suicide and lived. And another who thought about killing himself just this week.

It's mid-August, but Mark and Kym long ago shoved time into a blender. In the past three years they've done 200-plus presentations like this—a mix of PowerPoints and anecdotes, mission statements and video clips, empathy and stats, all addressing what *The New York Times* has called a mental health "crisis that is only now getting serious attention." Tyler Talks, they call them.

Mark, 57, is tall and burly. He could give a million of these talks and he would still sigh, still cry, at the same points. His face would still redden. Standing at the front of the room, to the audience's right, with Kym behind him, he clicks to advance a slide on a projector screen: *OUR VISION . . . a world where mental health and wellness will be supported in parity with physical health, and prioritized in connection to athletic performance.*

This all sounds great. It's courageous and critically important. But as Mark and Kym spread their gospel, they also heighten their own pain. It hurts to know that—statistically; realistically—someone in the audience will struggle just as their son did, while accepting that they will never be able to prevent every suicide. It hurts to do this, weeks stretching into years, at the expense of their own family, their own health. And, more than anything, it hurts to relive the worst moment of their lives, retelling Tyler's story, over and over. Impact and anguish drive each other higher still.

Kym—also 57; also tall, but thin, with blond hair—rises and sits and rises and sits while Mark speaks. She paces. Her eyes wet. To those who know her, she seems to grow ever skinnier, her frame winnowing over the months and years. *This is my reality*, she tells herself. *I don't know how else to live.*

BRADLEY
BRADLEY University Department of Communication
BRADLEY

She steps closer to the audience, looks at the athletes and tells them she sees her son in them. She sits down again . . . then stands again, her hands wiping away tears, arms folded, neck bent, frame scrunched up like she'd rather hide. In a room where toughness is expected, half of the audience is crying. Perhaps they can sense it: She endures this pain to give meaning to her son's death. For Mark and Kym, the cause becomes more urgent, their own lives less so.

They give and give, but some things are too heavy for these talks. Too heavy to say aloud. They have never spoken, for example, about the "strange conversation" they had shortly after their son's death. Both parents believed Tyler was in some version of an afterlife. Kym liked to imagine him "free of pain" and "being taken care of." They still had two living sons who needed them, more than ever—but now they were forced to consider: Did Tyler still need them, too? Kym can't recall who brought up the idea, but eventually they debated whether one of them should kill themself, to join Tyler.

FROM LEFT: DAVID E. KLUTHO; JOHN CORDES/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

HEAD SPACE

Mark and Kym (left; front, far left) shared Tyler's story—from his time at Washington State to his suicide in 2018—as part of a recent presentation at Bradley University.

The discussion never advanced beyond that point. They never explored whom or how. "But we did go there," says Kym, evincing the torment and turmoil they're still grappling with today.

Instead, they dedicated their lives to two purposes: ending mental health stigmas in sports and caring for their two other children. All that while traveling to universities like this one to save other Tylers, and to save those other Tylers' friends and families and coaches from the existence the Hilinskis now live.

MARK HILINSKI WAS an aquatics manager at a high school in Upland, Calif., more than 30 years ago when he interviewed a college student on her way to law school. Kym Haun got the lifeguarding job and, eventually, the law degree; Mark would go on to start a software company; and they married in 1991, eventually raising three football-loving boys in idyllic Orange County. The oldest, Kelly, played quarterback at Columbia and then Weber State. The youngest, Ryan, transferred in 2021 from South Carolina to Northwestern, where he split QB duties this season before tearing his left ACL and MCL.

Tyler, the middle child, was a backup at Washington State, then a spot starter. In January 2018 he was poised to be named QB1. Instead, he died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at his off-campus apartment.

Within months, Mark and Kym had started a foundation, Hilinski's Hope. To raise money and awareness for mental health. To create resources. To erase stigmas. To save lives. They put themselves in front of people often and just talked. They told Tyler's story, to keep his memory alive. And they stressed, above all, that suicide can happen to anyone and that you don't need a tragedy to ask for help.

The foundation is built on colleges, because Washington State, like most schools, lacked the resources Tyler needed. (WSU, at the time, had one part-time counselor for an athletic department with 525 athletes.) So now Mark and Kym assist universities in institutionalizing best practices for improving mental health. And, because they're not licensed practitioners, they connect athletes with experts. All of this, they hope, will save lives.

Mark and Kym now exist in both the past and the future, their lives bifurcated on the day Tyler died. They decided long ago, Mark says, that "it's better to be lost in this world, trying to help people," than anywhere else. But, he says, "I don't know how long we'll do it for."

The Hilinskis' experience speaks to a crisis: A staggering number of young and accomplished athletes are dying by suicide. (More than before? The data doesn't exist to compare. But, undoubtedly, awareness of these deaths is heightened. People are shaken.) And Hilinski's Hope speaks to a sea change. More awareness. More resources and support. More of an understanding that mental health struggles should not be viewed as a weakness—in part through the observed experiences of stars across all sports. Simone Biles. Dak Prescott. Michael Phelps. Mikaela Shiffrin. Naomi Osaka.

And Tyler. There's no shortage of studies suggesting that his particular ecosystem, college sports, is in particular need of help. From the National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Suicide is the second-highest cause of death for people between 10 and 34. From the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: For those between 18 and 25, rates of suicidal thoughts, plans and attempts are all higher. And from the NCAA: Anxiety, mental exhaustion and depression are twice as high among college athletes now compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why? Start with still-developing brains. Add in external pressures. Internal expectations. Isolation. Social media and the swamp of negativity it can be. It all creates a world that for many is nearly impossible to navigate.

In positioning themselves to help athletes find their way, the Hilinskis have become both the most recognizable faces of an unthinkable tragedy and, as ESPN recently put it, two of football's "biggest powerbrokers and advocates shaping the future." (The Hilinskis struggle with their place on such lists; they certainly don't feel like they're alone in mental health advocacy. They point to other organizations and student-led initiatives, but none match Hilinski's Hope in terms of programming or scope.)

Mark doesn't love saying this, but he's come to the conclusion that, yes, Tyler was distinct, but what happened to him was sadly typical. "F---," he says, "this happens every day."

This is the ubiquity the Hilinskis are up against:

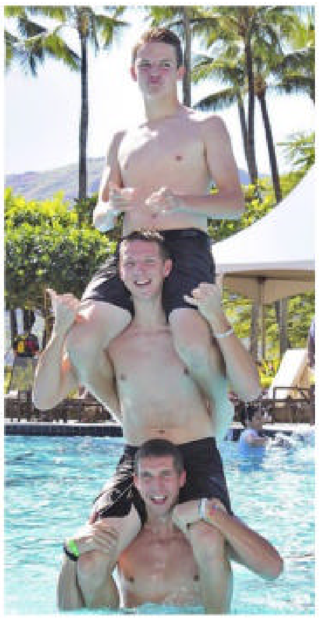
- March 2022: Katie Meyer, a Stanford soccer goalkeeper, dies by suicide.
- April: Robert Martin, a lacrosse goalie at SUNY Binghamton, dies by suicide. And Jayden Hill, a track and field athlete at Northern Michigan. And Sarah Schulze, a cross-country runner at Wisconsin. And Lauren Bernett, a catcher at James Madison.
- May: Arlana Miller, a cheerleader at Southern.

They're each, in some way, Tyler. They're also each propelling Mark and Kym forward, despite costs that range from money to health to time. That's the Hilinskis' trade-off. Those lives versus their own. And *those* lives always win.

KYM NEVER SPENT much energy on why Tyler killed himself. She pushed to have his coroner's report sealed and hid the family's copy inside of a safe deposit box. But she relives his final hours daily. At night, her mind wanders into darkness, imagining Tyler on the day he died, the emotions that must have surged through him. She always stops as he climbs into a closet and grabs an assault rifle. She can't quite go there.

Mark had made *Why?* his mission. He hired a data forensic firm to unlock Tyler's phone and find his final searches. What he found—*How to load an AR-15? Is an AR-15 really fatal?*—hardly answered anything, and his quest dented his health but not his sorrow. He put on weight, which exacerbated his back pain, and he argued with Kym and Ryan and Kelly over his daily steps count. Sure, he'd already had a bovine valve inserted near his heart, but, he asked, *Does that really matter, after everything?*

Each parent could do only what made sense to them. Kym stayed busy, running marathons and putting together care packages—literature about Hilinski's Hope, but also T-shirts and hoodies and hats and wristbands. She wrote thousands of thank-you notes, to



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POWER HOUSE

All three Hilinski boys played QB in college. From bottom: Kelly at Columbia and Weber State; Tyler at WSU; Ryan at South Carolina and, today, Northwestern (right).

anyone who donated to the foundation. She answered calls from parents desperate for advice on how to deal with a child's anguish or guilt or sorrow. Meanwhile, she hasn't visited a dentist in almost five years. She's gone to the doctor once, after breaking her pelvis in a fall. And Mark understands. When Kym stops, she's left with her own thoughts. It's easier to keep moving.

Kym understands Mark's search, too. He was sorting through his anguish. But even after he started walking more and watching what he ate, she still worried. Their undertaking was exacting a physical and mental toll. When it comes to their foundation, she wishes he wouldn't say, for example, that their work sometimes feels "so f---ing stupid."

Mark tries to explain the steep cost of it all: He loves hearing stories about Tyler, but he hates discussing Tyler in the past tense. He wants to be happy, especially for his boys, but he cannot always summon it, which leads to guilt, which lasers his focus on the lives he *didn't* change, the kids he *couldn't* reach. Which adds up to an unshakable sense of powerlessness.

That particular circle of torture was in full effect in August, between Tyler Talks, when the Hilinskis traveled to Dublin, where Ryan was starting for Northwestern against Nebraska. At the team hotel they handed Ryan a letter, same as they had before every game of their sons' careers. Inside, this time, Kym also tucked a patch that Tyler had worn during a youth tournament in Ireland, in 2012.

The next day, rushing to the game, the Hilinskis had to remind themselves that that afternoon mattered. "One of the things I miss is we push off talking about the good things," Mark says. "There's always more to do."

Ryan threw for 314 yards and two touchdowns, with the patch tucked under his right thigh pad, in a Wildcats victory. After five unfathomable years—after his brother's death and after electing not to play for a Pac-12 school because he couldn't stomach the burden of following Tyler to the same conference—here was, undeniably, one of those good things his dad speaks of. In the brief time Ryan spent with his parents afterward, he said he could feel Tyler with him and would "remember this day forever."

"WE PUSH OFF TALKING ABOUT THE GOOD THINGS," MARK SAYS. **"THERE'S ALWAYS MORE TO DO."**

COURTESY OF THE HILINSKI FAMILY (BROTHERS); PETER MORRISON/AP (RYAN HILINSKI)

But Mark sees clearly how the experience was, in some ways, tainted. "It must feel like such a burden for him," he says. "He's doing this for his brother. There's always so much on him. . . . And there's just an unfairness to that, because Ryan can never have the same level of highs. Nothing is ever as good as before."

Ultimately, Mark would leave Ireland inspired, wanting to dive right back into the foundation's work and "take this thing to the next level." But that high came with a low, as always. The Hilinskis brought a small amount of Tyler's ashes to the game and sprinkled them near one end zone as Mark blew a kiss skyward—and those 30 seconds, special as they were, drove his mind back to the same place. *Man, if only Tyler could have been here.*

But Tyler wasn't there. He wouldn't be ever again.

"We didn't win anything," Mark says.

AN HOUR BEFORE their Tyler Talk in August, the Hilinskis' rental car pulls right up next to Maverik Stadium in Logan, Utah. Blake Anderson, Utah State's coach, is waiting to escort Mark and Kym inside. It's 6:33 p.m., Kym notes, and there's

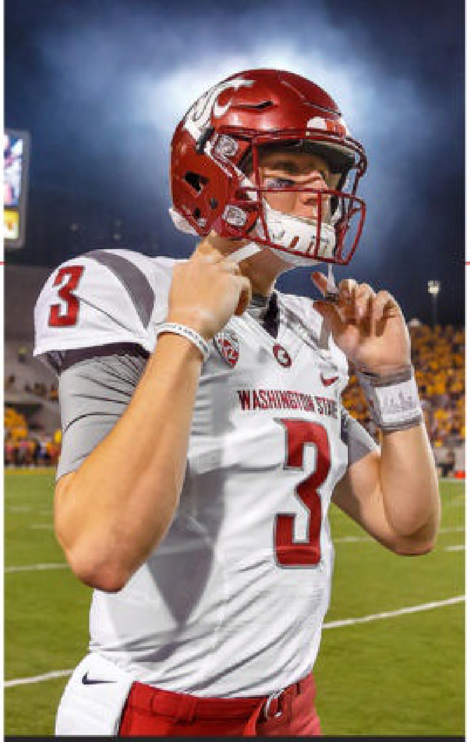
Tyler's jersey number, 3, repeated, a sign that her son is "saying hi" as they plow ahead.

Anderson guides them to his spacious office, with a view of the field, and as the Hilinskis settle into a black leather couch he begins laying out his last six years in their unfathomable totality: his first wife's cancer diagnosis, her death, his father's death, his brother's colon cancer. Then, in February, his son Cason's death by suicide.

Cason, like Tyler, was 21.

After the onslaught of tragedies, Anderson implemented "night meetings," to address everything *but* football with his players. He began recruiting guest speakers—people like Mark and Kym. At this moment, though, no one's a power broker. Looking across the room, Anderson and his second wife, Brittany, see just another set of parents trying to figure out a way forward when it seems impossible to summon the energy, the courage.

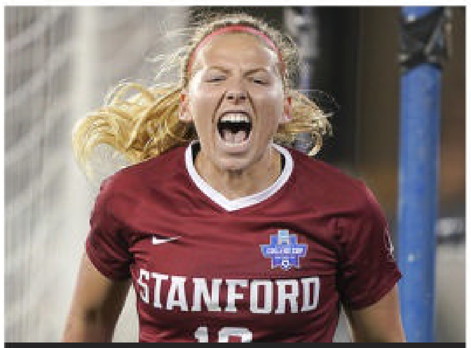
Anderson informs his guests that a player on his team attempted suicide a year ago. The coach isn't sure whether this player will approach the Hilinskis but suspects he might and wants them to be emotionally prepared for it.



TYLER HILINSKI › 21
Washington State football

ARLANA MILLER › 19
Southern cheerleading

SARAH SCHULZE › 21
Wisconsin cross-country



KATIE MEYER › 22
Stanford soccer

LAUREN BERNETT › 20
James Madison softball

ROBERT MARTIN › 23
SUNY Binghamton lacrosse

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: COLIN E. BRALEY/AP; COURTESY OF WISCONSIN ATHLETICS; MARK J. REBILAS/USA TODAY SPORTS; COURTESY OF SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY AND A&M COLLEGE; JOHN TODD/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; BINGHAMTON UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS

Anderson says over and over that he doesn't want to "dive into this stuff" . . . and then he dives back in. The Hilinskis have this effect on people. He tells them that Cason had been the "happiest individual on the planet," low-key and balanced, revealing nothing at home that raised alarms. Anderson believes his son took his own life because he "didn't want to burden us."

Kym gasps. She thinks Tyler felt the same way. Blake and Cason had just spent New Year's together, everything perfect—much like the vacation Mark and Kym took with Tyler, to Mexico, shortly before he died. Mark points out the parallels. Anderson shakes his head.

"The reality is: We want to think of Tyler in that audience," Mark says. "And your son."

The coach worries about his team. "They have seen me really struggle," he says. "I'm very open with them. I don't hold back. I tell them that I'm struggling—but I've got a great family and great friends I lean on every day.

"I don't let a lot of people in front of my family," he goes on. "But I feel completely at peace about you guys being here."

Silence hangs heavy in the air.

"I'm not at the point where I'm ready to start talking about this," Blake says.

More nodding.

"I'd argue that we're not, either," Mark responds.

AS MARK AND KYM evolved as individuals in the months after Tyler's death, so did their combined presence in the mental-health-in-college-sports space. Different approaches led both to the same place—a longing to do *something, anything*, for as long as possible. They didn't know what happened to their son, but they did know that there were programs and people with expertise in this space, and that those programs, those people, would have given him a chance to ask for help.

Could Mark and Kym help everyone? No. Anyone? Probably. Maybe they'd find out if they tried. Maybe not.

Their willingness to assist all who asked meant giving more of everything. More phone calls. More Tyler Talks. More care packages. More interviews with media. It took them to Alabama. Georgia. Back to Washington State. Hundreds of other colleges. They met with officials from athletic conferences and school districts and spoke at mental health seminars. They hope they are needed, but they understand that being needed hurts. Their impact is exactly what they wanted. And the personal agony of it all is exactly what those around them fear. Numerous people who know the Hilinskis express some version of the same sentiment: *I'm worried about them*.

When Katie Meyer, the Stanford goalie, died, teammates reached out to Kym before the news broke publicly, and it dragged Kym back to her own tragedy. (Often, whether an athlete has died by suicide, attempted suicide or considered suicide, someone close to the athlete has reached out to the Hilinskis, sometimes before contacting anyone else.)

When Lauren Bernett, the James Madison softball player, died in April, Kym was stung. There had been a Tyler Talk planned at the school two years earlier, but it was canceled due to COVID-19. She blamed herself, unreasonable as she knew that was.

Rising overall suicide rates—up for every age group in 2021, according to the CDC, with the highest spike among 15- to 24-year-olds—have alarmed her, especially after so many talks. She can imagine the day when someone who sat in an audience listening to them will still die by suicide. "Eventually, it's going to [happen]," Kym says.

The rewards of the Hilinskis' mission can sometimes be obvious: emails and text messages and social media telling them, directly, about suicides they have prevented. After every Tyler Talk, it seems, someone approaches and whispers those magical words: *You just saved my life*. But the other half of their reality is as tortuous as the first is heartening. They don't see what *doesn't* happen. Most of the impact they have, they'll never know, which makes it easier to see what's missing rather than what's there.

So Mark and Kym focus on what feels right. On what mental health practitioners say. And they hang on to the athletes who linger at the edges after Tyler Talks, those desperate to speak truths but uncomfortable sharing in front of a larger group. Many of them reveal details they haven't shared elsewhere, which is the power and the burden the Hilinskis hold.

Those interactions, Kym says, are gratifying—and yet she realizes how "strange" that sounds. "I'm not happy that anyone is struggling and suffering. But I am happy they are reaching out and getting help."

What about her? The human being.

"I want to run away sometimes," she says. "But I look at Ryan and Kelly and all these athletes, and we can't."

INSTEAD, THEY DIG deeper, expand.

"Guess who called," Mark says in September. The NFL, the most powerful league in U.S. sports, has reached out and wants to explore a partnership. He laughs at the absurdity of it all. College football power brokers? Roger Goodell knowing his name? It's a bit much, this ecosystem, larger than ever and growing.

In telling Tyler's story, the Hilinskis have unintentionally started an ever-expanding web. Media accounts of Mark's and Kym's suffering heightened everything—interest, donations, kind souls who volunteered to help. It wasn't long before Kym stopped reaching out to others, because they were reaching out to her. She found the sharing—people demonstrating the tools to express their deepest fears and pains—to be cathartic. "Our therapy," she says.

The number of Tyler Talks has increased each year. Mark and Kym have told Tyler's story at least 50 times, in 15 states, just since Utah. They've spoken in sprawling auditoriums and meeting rooms, even once inside a baseball locker room. They directed a Big Ten soccer player to a campus therapist after she tore her ACL. They assisted a Big 12 football player who was grieving the death of a relative. They found worn-out mental health practitioners at schools with limited resources and set them up in brainstorm sessions with leaders at larger programs who had found solutions.

These connections matter above all else. But growth has meant more of everything. More travel. More time apart from their children. More financial investment. (The Hilinskis, who work out of their home, estimate they've spent $250,000 on their foundation already.)

The blueprint they've ended up on, with the help of dozens of mental health experts, includes a 100-plus-page "Game Plan," with six training modules that can be shared with any league or corporation or individual asking for help. An "order of operations" document lays out their process: (1) training for the mental health practitioners who'll execute their plan; (2) a Tyler Talk; (3) a Facilitator Handbook, for anyone looking to spread the Hilinski's Hope message; (4) mental health training for athletes; (5) a "scorecard" to help adapt these guidelines to any distinct setting and "implement the NCAA's Mental Health Best Practices"; and (6) additional training, which is optional.

The Hilinskis also created College Football Mental Health Week, in 2020, at the beginning of October

THREES COMPANY

The Hilinskis (with Kelly) pay tribute to Tyler by flashing his jersey number—and during College Football Mental Health Week they were joined in 2022 by advocates at more than 120 schools.

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each year. They asked schools and players all over the country to participate—by wearing ribbons or helmet decals; by engaging in training sessions; by simply holding up three fingers, for Tyler's No. 3, at the start of the third quarter. Alabama joined—Nick Saban made the hand gesture on the sideline. So did Georgia. Clemson. Texas A&M. Even Washington State. Elite programs considered the Hilinskis' work valuable—they saw what Mark and Kym struggled at times to see themselves.

Participation has ballooned every year: from 17 schools to 65 to 123 in 2022, when the Hilinskis raised $115,000 and made a significant stamp on social media. And now the NFL's calling—maybe even interested in creating its own mental health week.

The work, Kym says, has saved her life, on those nights when she has no longer wanted to live. But, Mark says, "we have to be real careful about how we count success. We're still losing 123 people a day [in the U.S.] to suicide."

The simple fact remains: Mark would still trade "every one of these good things" to "have [Tyler] back for 30 seconds."

EVERYWHERE THEY LOOK across the college sports landscape the Hilinskis see signs of change—evidence that more schools are embracing their approach, that more athletes are getting resources. And that combination is likely to save lives.

Take, for example, the University of Nevada.

Ken Wilson, the assistant coach who recruited Tyler to Washington State, happened to be near the Hilinskis' home in Orange County when Mark called in 2018 to say that Tyler had missed practice. Which was unusual; Tyler *never* missed practice. A few hours later, Mark called back: "Tyler's dead."

Wilson would stay at the Hilinskis' house that week to help watch over Ryan and Kelly while the devastated parents flew to Pullman. One day later they addressed Tyler's teammates, and Mark says Hilinski's Hope was essentially born right there. (Neither Mark nor Kym would return to their jobs after that day.)

Then, last December, following two years at Oregon, Wilson got a call about Nevada's head coaching job. For the first time in his career he would run a major college program. He would also become a major part of the Hilinskis' web.

On the first morning of Wilson's dream gig, his wife, Heather, didn't say, *Good luck* or *Give 'em hell*. She said: "We're going to start a mental health program."

They knew exactly who to call. Across Wilson's 36 years in coaching, he says, "except for the most extreme cases, [mental health] was left in the dark." Now, in Mark and Kym, he had a remarkable resource. The Hilinskis helped arrange a seminar for Nevada's coaches, trainers, support staff and administrators; and what struck Wilson was how many of them shared their own struggles. Coaches worried about players and their families. Officials feared an ever-shifting landscape.

The university has since pumped $120,000 into mental health, hiring an in-house professional specifically for athletes, getting others certified in Mental Health First Aid and creating a program to help students communicate when they need support. The athletic department required that all 450 athletes, coaches and staff members complete the Hilinskis' six training modules.

And all of that happened in less than three months. To Mark and Kym, Nevada is a model, a path forward, a way to apply their blueprint all over the country, others carrying the message for them. ("Sprinkling magic Tyler pixie dust all around," Mark calls it.) It's also a window into the Hilinskis' effect. When Mark and Kym visited for a Tyler Talk, in August, Ken pointed to the blue HILINSKI'S HOPE wristband affixed to his right hand. He had one of the originals. He'd never removed it.

Now, what happens when there are 10 Nevadas? Forty? One hundred? "That's when the landscape *really* changes," Mark says.

They can see it happening, however slowly. From Nevada to Nick Saban to Big Ten commissioner Kevin Warren, who recently told his own story, including the months he spent bedridden as a child after

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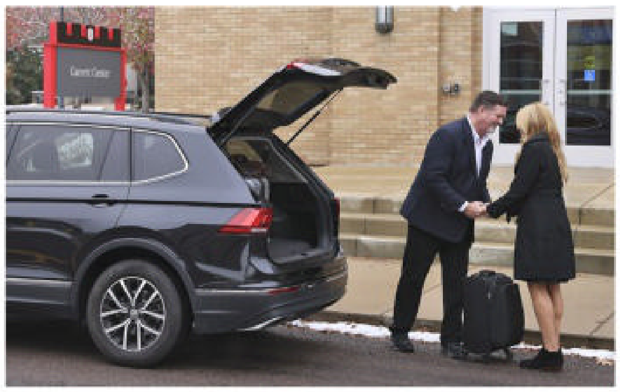
being struck by a car. He, too, created a mental health initiative, in 2020. They can see it in the thousands of college athletes who have signed up for the Hilinskis' online course. And at Ohio State. When junior Buckeyes lineman Harry Miller retired from college football in March, after revealing his own self-harm and suicide attempts, the school labeled his decision a "medical issue." That's important, because it places mental health alongside physical injury.

The way the Hilinskis see it, mental health and performance tie together in so much as victories incentivize decision makers. A tipping point will be reached when others see it the way they do—when resources and dollars committed to mental health are considered central to winning games.

"LOSS IS BRUTAL," MARK SAYS. MAKES IT INCREDIBLY HARD FOR A

ON THE ROAD AGAIN



After wrapping up a Tyler Talk at Bradley, Mark and Kim were off to the next. Each one is equal parts painful and cathartic.

DAVID E. KLUTHO

Now imagine more programs like Alabama's, with its small army of assistants, devoting ample resources to mental health. Best believe that other schools would follow. Conversely, what if a team like Nevada becomes better, faster, stronger than anyone imagined? Then, Mark says, "we have a culture of assistance and help and growth. [That help] is not a burden. It becomes a strength."

THE TYLER TALK in Utah ends. Players stand and clap. Most form a receiving line, from the top of the auditorium stairs all the way to the front, where Mark and Kym wait for whoever might need them.

Some players wrap the Hilinskis tight, like they don't want to let go. Two, though, linger on the fringes, like they have something they must say in private. One is the player Anderson prepared them for. Kym frees up first, and the player beelines toward her, every step injected with deep purpose. He spares no detail: his anxiety. A car accident that made everything feel darker, untenable, worse.

Soon, he says, it will have been a year since he took a shotgun and fired a bullet through his own chest. He calls it a gift that he survived. He says he hopes to inspire others, but he hasn't said anything publicly yet. Maybe he'll make an Instagram video, he says, and tell the world. Kym asks about his parents. "Hanging in," the athlete says, adding that he speaks to a psychologist.

"It [was] a coin flip, and I got a different result," he says of his surviving. "I want to keep going."

Later, Kym huddles with the other player, a lineman who recently became a father. His partner was supposed to have twins, but one of the babies was stillborn. He tells Kym that he considered suicide that week but told no one. Later, he'll DM Kym of their talk: "Thank you guys so much! You probably saved my life!!!!"

The coin flip and the son, Tyler, who they couldn't save . . . countered by this Tyler Talk and the athletes they did help. This is the Hilinskis' reality and their duality—their odd liminal space between unimaginable grief and unwavering purpose. It's not a choice; it's the only way they can exist. And those who understand this worry for them. Like Mark's cousin Jon Welge. In describing the impact of Tyler's death, Welge uses the analogy of a lightning bolt striking their family tree: The impact doesn't just splinter the base; it fragments individual branches. "They're not all going to heal the same way," he says. If they ever heal at all.

"There will never be a normal again," says Kym. The planner she carries with her at Utah State is proof, all scribbles and lines and cross-outs and hearts. A trip to Clemson. A meeting with a traveling team of college prospects. Kelly. Ryan. A charity golf tournament. Her cousin's lacrosse team. The Wilsons.

She starts laughing, because what else is there to do? All this travel, all this work, all this pain—everything tied to whether it's worth the effort and whether it actually helps, when, the truth is, they will never really know.

"We start settling down in November," she says, like she's trying to convince herself.

Is it worth it? Mark and Kym often wonder. And then something happens to suggest it is. Recently, the mother of one of the Stanford soccer players who found Meyer dead inside of a dorm room sent Kym a text message: "She's smiling and at soccer practice again."

“LOSS BY SUICIDE HAS AN EXTRA ELEMENT OF FEAR THAT LONG TIME. **THIS IS A CRISIS. THIS HAS TO STOP.”**

“I do know that life goes on for everybody else,” Kym says. “Right?”

Then, the other side. Kym mentions Tyler’s friends and teammates. One player—the one who showed Tyler how to use a gun the day before Tyler shot himself—just got married. Kym recently visited Pullman, and this player found her; he said he was devastated and blamed himself. “I can’t be mad at you,” Kym told him.

But *happy* for him? She wants to be. She is. She thinks she is . . .

“I am happy for those kids,” she says, citing examples of Tyler’s old teammates who’ve since found work in mental health or coaching. Each took a little piece of Tyler with them out into the world. This makes sense to her, and it doesn’t make sense at all. Tyler’s teammates deserve to be happy, to live long and full lives. The thing that complicates it is: So did Tyler.

In recent months Mark’s dedication to the cause only further solidified. But it’s born of despair. After one Tyler Talk, at George Mason in October, he met softball players who knew the James Madison catcher who died by suicide. They were, he says, “as sad as I’ve ever seen a group after our talk.”

“Loss is brutal,” he says. “Loss by suicide has an extra element of fear that makes it incredibly hard for a long time. . . . This is a crisis. This has to stop.”

A week later, Mark sends a picture of another stage, at another school. What else can they do here, besides what they’re already doing?

It’s time for another Tyler Talk. ☐

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POINT AFTER

GOAT CHECK

During 2022 we saw several epic careers come to a close. (For now, at least; those retirement plans can be fickle.) But the year also introduced us to a handful of young performers who showed not only the skill but the flair, the je ne sais quoi that makes a great a GOAT. **CARLOS ALCARAZ** became the youngest men's tennis player to be ranked No. 1 in the world after he won the U.S. Open in September at 19. Not even the noise around her decision to represent her mother's homeland of China could drown out the gasps induced by **EILEEN GU**, the San Francisco–born phenom who won three freestyle skiing medals as an 18-year-old in Beijing. And **JULIO RODRÍGUEZ**, who had played all of 46 games above Class A before this season, helped the Mariners back to the playoffs for the first time since October '01, when he was 10 months old. Three of the year's most dazzling performers: one barely in his 20s and the others still in their teens—fitting, since baby goats are, of course, known as kids.

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